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# How to Tell a Sea Story

Brock Yusef Hamlin

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, bhamli1@lsu.edu*

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HOW TO TELL A SEA STORY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

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by

Brock Y. Hamlin

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
How To Tell A Sea Story.....	1
Vita.....	.217

## ABSTRACT

A young African American adolescent named Lion is forced to leave his hometown of Rivertown, and join the navy. While in the navy, Lion acts as an enforcer and collector for another sailor who runs an illegal money-lending operation on the ship. Lion also learns how to box and manages to fight his way to the Fifth Fleet championships. After winning the championship fight, the captain of the ship uses his influence to place Lion in a very competitive commissioning program. With the chance of becoming an officer, Lion changes his behavior, leading to serious conflict with old allies. He escapes the ship, but not unscathed. The psychological effects resonate after he graduates from college. These psychological scars are played out in his relationship with the love of his life, a young woman named Nicole, who comes from a wealthy black family.

# One

*Rivertown*

I had a wonderful summer and a pleasant fall, but in the spring, everything went bad all at once. I had spent the first six weeks of summer at Chelsea Summer Bridge, a program for young black high school kids with potential. The institute gave us ten dollars a day and on Friday afternoons, after a morning of pre-calculus, computer programming, and molecular biology, a guest speaker would lecture us on topics such as teenage pregnancy, standard English, crime prevention, and proper college interview attire. Of course, I'd be in the back of the class pencil fighting, but still, I loved taking classes in those beautiful, stone-grey buildings. After snapping a classmate's pencil in two, I walked along the sloping green trails with real college students, pretending, pondering the possibility that I could be one of them. I was even invited to a couple of college parties, but inevitably, I'd be uncovered. "Hey that kid's in high school. Leave him alone."

Home was a different story. I tried to spend as little time there as possible, my stepfather having stepped up the improvement campaign to include chores around the house, memorization of the Gettysburg Address, and important dates in the Civil Rights Movement. My stepfather worked in the downtown boiler, tending the city's fire and water. He'd come home, change clothes, and force me to answer questions about trigonometry, civics, literature, music, and the black man's place in the world.

The whole time he talked, I wanted to grab my nuts and say, right here. I wanted to hang out with my friends, but most of my friends were away playing AAU basketball. Although I was a fair player, AAU ball was way out of my

league. I was mediocre even for the CYO. To wile away the time, I spent my evenings at a local park hitting a tennis ball against a slab of concrete. I tried to play on the courts with the adults, mind you, but they took one look at my shabby Don Budge wooden racquet, my shiny basketball shorts, and playfully ignored my numerous requests to join them.

By the middle of July, I had saved up enough money to buy a new graphite racquet, white tennis shorts, and a pair of stylish Stan Smiths. I was also skilled enough to simulate elaborate match-like situations I had seen during Wimbledon coverage. I launched vicious assaults on the concrete practice wall, and sometimes, even came out the victor. I enjoyed rehearsing that moment just after championship point. I sank to my knees and raised my arms to the heavens. I would have thrown my racquet into the air, but it was my only racquet.

The tennis regulars, mostly middle-aged, cigarette-smoking crows, were a bit fickle. They never spoke to me directly, never recognized me beyond a nod, as if I were a child in the room full of grown folks. I was never picked for round robin play. That didn't bother me a great deal. I'd seen the crows dismiss many new faces, including a young woman with muscular thighs and a real no-nonsense disposition. She was like a good-looking, black Martina. The tennis crowd didn't like her attitude at all. They wanted her to pay some dues, whatever that meant. I called her older, but she couldn't have been more than twenty-two. Still huffing and puffing from rejection, the woman walked to the other side of the concrete slab. The woman didn't even look at me as she opened the metal gate and slammed it shut. I heard grunts paced evenly apart. I began practicing my groundstrokes, pretending I was in the last game of a grueling match against Boris Becker or maybe Yannick Noah. At match point, I mishit a certain winner, and the ball caromed to the other side of the wall. I retrieved the ball

and turned to watch the older woman hit clean, flat groundstrokes. Her form was economic, clean and controlled, free from excessive backstroke. She wore a pleated white skirt, a collared polo shirt, short ruffled white socks, and white tennis shoes splashed with a green, italicized "U"-shape. She sensed me watching and picked the ball clean out of its racing arc, like a cat swatting at a fly. She held the ball and smiled at me. I wanted to turn and run, but I was frozen to my spot. She asked me if he wanted to hit. I nodded, not knowing what "hitting" entailed. I simply followed her lead.

She drove to a well-lit court built especially for nighttime tennis. When she put the first ball in play, all eight courts were full. We two hit for hours that evening, and I was tireless. I chased down every point for three sets. I noticed the woman's forehead shining with sweat, her face seemed flushed and vigorous. She hit the last winner, and we shook hands at the net. I looked around and noticed that we were the only players left.

The young woman bent over to place her racquets in a large green duffel bag. I saw a line of sweat run down the middle of her white skirt. She asked me if I was thirsty, and I nodded, although was I supposed to have been home hours ago. A timed controller thunked loudly, plunging us into complete darkness. For a moment, I could only see her white teeth and her white outfit. She smiled. My eyes adjusted quickly then I could see the contours of her face. She was handsome, not beautiful. But she had very nice flushed skin.

"When do you have to be home?" she asked.

"I'm all right."

We got into her little green Honda and she drove me to her apartment. Janine poured me a glass of pop.

"Pop?" she said, laughing. "Is that what you call it down here? A bit provincial, don't you think?" That was the first time I had heard a black person use the word

"provincial" in a sentence. It was also the last time I called soda "pop". Janine poured a glass of chilled white wine. I had never seen anyone pour wine either. I came from a family that drank wine, but not from the glass.

The apartment had too few lamps and was full of the kind of furniture passed down by grandparents to children who needed to furnish an apartment quickly. The furniture--sofa, coffee table, entertainment center--seemed big, dark, and heavy. It made me feel comfortable.

Janine gave me the remote and left the living room. I watched highlights from the days' matches. Martina Navratilova continued to storm her through the women's draw. The sportscaster highlighted a very agile player that I began rooting for. That would be Miloslav Mecir, a Czech, whose sly cunning game greatly appealed to me. I heard pipes rattle, a stream of water hitting porcelain. After a few minutes, Janine poked her head around the corner. I couldn't see the rest of her body.

"Join me?" she asked. She had big white teeth, the kind for laughing with your head tilted way back, the kind of teeth that did their best work on cold, hard apples. I placed the glass of soda down on a coaster and looked back up. When turned the corner, I saw that the woman was gloriously nude; the fullness of her breasts, the slope of her hips, the wide diamond of thick black pubic hair, and those thighs, twitching like a horse's muscles. It took my breath away. It was the most impressive sight I had ever seen, second only to the time my grandmother neglected to lock the door while she took an afternoon bath. Janine took me by the hand and led me to the shower.

I liked Janine. I mean, she really made me into a man. She had a peculiar way about her. She could make orders resemble suggestions. And she did all the preparation. I felt as if I were always on call, but in a good way. I phoned her once or twice, but she seemed irritated so I stopped. She initiated every encounter, a phone call during



the early afternoon while my Mom and stepfather were still at work. We would play two sets of singles, or three sets of doubles. Afterwards, she would offer me a ride and a drink, and I would graciously accept.

Another thing I liked about Janine. She was seriously competitive. Really. Janine had the ability to will herself to win. Around the middle of the set Janine ceased the idle tennis chatter. Between points, I noticed that Janine adjusted her strings instead of exchanging glances and strategy. She had this quiet, vicious will to win. And so I began to do the same.

One evening, instead of tennis, Janine planned to take me to a play. A real play in a real theater, not a black morality play starring, say, Peabo Bryson or Patti LaBelle. I put on my best outfit, which consisted of a long-sleeve, multicolored, collared shirt, a thin black leather tie, and a pair of gray baggie pants with creases that had been ironed to a sheen. I considered throwing on the schoolboy glasses, but decided against it.

I heard a chuckle and saw Roland's reflection in the mirror. Roland shook his head.

"Boy, where do you think you going? To the circus?"

"To a play."

"With who? Your mother ain't say nothing to me bout no play."

"A friend."

"This friend a girl?"

"She's my tennis partner."

"Uh huh. She see you in that clown outfit like that, I guarantee you, she'll think twice about going anywhere in public with you."

Who was this guy to talk? He wore a monkey suit everyday. He had to take one-hour baths to get all the grime and caked up dirt off him. I was a veritable GQ playboy compared to my stepfather. Deeply offended. I turned back to the mirror, impressed with my jazzy ensemble.

My stepfather came back into the room unzipping a plastic laundry bag. A light khaki single-breasted suit hung from the thick wooden collar of a hanger.

"What's that, your nicest pair of overalls?" I asked.

"Very funny. Now take that clown outfit off. I know I'm a knuckle dragger. A nut turner. A balpeen hammer head. But I got a little knowledge and I'm gone teach you something. Women can't teach you what I'm gone teach you. Least no woman I know. Let me ask you something. Do you want to be taken seriously?"

"Course," I answered.

"Then first take that goddamn clown outfit off."

I flinched, then began undressing. I untied my tie and began taking off my shirt.

Roland held my thin, black leather tie like a dead garden snake. "What the fuck is ya'll youngens wearing these days, boy?"

"A tie?"

"If this is a real tie, then my name Stag-o-Lee. You won't never get taken seriously in this faggoty tie. I don't care what no white man in a magazine says."

Roland took the tie away and came back a few minutes later with a white shirt, suspenders, and several wide ties that looked suitable for the vice principals at school.

"Put on your cleanest t-shirt and cleanest pair of drawers. You got any brown socks?"

"Sure."

"How about shoes? Cap-toes?"

"I have what you see right here." I pointed at the foot of the closet: a pair of boat shoes, espadrilles, and ragged loafers. Roland frowned. He made a disparaging remark about my mother's ability to raise a man. Then he looked at me. "You didn't hear that." I shook my head.

"Now look. Back when I was in the secular world—I'm not no more—but when I was, I made sure that when I stepped out the house, people took me seriously even though I didn't

take myself seriously. This here a serious suit. It's called a summer suit cause of the weight, the color, the material. Feel that there."

The fabric was soft as silk, but had a muted camel color. I felt shiny, but didn't look shiny.

"Feel good, like a baby's behind, don't it?"

I agreed.

"You can wear this suit from about the middle of May to the middle of September. Sort of depends on where you at."

I nodded in agreement.

"I don't need you to agree. I'm telling you. You was about to walk out of here looking like a clown. You gone be brand new when I get through with ya."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I can see you changing already. Lion, age-wise, you getting to be a man. A man's got to act like a man. Put away childish things, that's in the bible, right? They got forty-year-old men out there acting like teenagers, wearing jogging suits, bright colors, tight pants, faggoty leather ties, right? One of the first steps to acting like a man is looking like a man. Walking like a man. None of that pimping shit. Nobody gonna a hire a nigga cause of his pimping style. Look for a job like a man. Before you get that job though, a man's got to look like a man, else the white boy that's hiring you gone think you ain't serious. Ain't nothing worse then a clown-ass-nigga. He the worst kind of nigga. The white man gone think you one of them type to get that first check and don't show up the day after payday. You wanna be that kind a nigga?"

"Uh uh."

"Your momma—who I love with all my heart—won't teach you this—cause she can't teach you this. She too concerned with her baby boy looking cute. I tell her that you bound to get into some trouble. She just say my baby boy is a nice boy. Well, she's your momma, she supposed to think that way about you. I give a goddamn you look cute. I care about you

being a man. Now your momma get on your sister about dating that little hoodlum Pelham cause she know about woman situations, but she won't get on you because she don't know man situations."

"Uh huh."

"A woman look at you in this suit, she think, that's a serious man. Them other mens will dance and call her sugar and say real sweet things and wear velvet clothes and drive a Caddy, but they ain't serious mens. Some women like that kind of thang, but that's a piece of ass that don't last."

Like a butler, Roland placed the jacket on me and padded my shoulders. I felt his heavy calloused hands, the strength in his wrists and forearms. Roland wasn't a bad guy. I felt guilty for all the things I'd done to harm his relationship with Mom. My stepfather tried to suppress a smile as he looked at my reflection.

"That's what I'm talking about. That's a serious man. Now let's find you some cap-toe lace ups. Wearing the wrong shoes will ruin the whole thing. You might as well wear some brogans, some big ole red clown shoes as them shoes right there."

"Hey, GQ," Janine exclaimed when she picked me up.

"Hello, Janine." I said it real cool like I dressed that way all the time.

Tell her she looks fantastic, even if she don't.

"You look wonderful, Janine."

While driving, she glanced over several times. "I have to admit that I was afraid you might wear something, umm, inappropriate. I've only seen you in tennis gear."

"I wouldn't embarrass you."

"Well, you look different. Older. Sexier."

It was true, I felt smarter, more carefree, like I could say anything and it would matter or be funny or both. When we walked into the play, I did the small things that Roland had told me: *Now make sure you act like a gentleman,*

*but don't be all exaggerated about it. You know, tell her a little joke while you hold the door open. When you walk on the sidewalk, make sure you on the street side.*

*And I did.*

*Let her talk. Listen to her. Look into her eyes. Nod. If she go to the bathroom—when she come back?—tell her that you missed her.*

*Again.*

*Now this ain't gonna make no sense, but it's true. And if you do this, you gonna be all right. Now womens, they like you to interpret they shit, like you some kind of mind reader. They don't mean nothing they say, straight out the way they say. If she cold, she ain't gonna say I'm cold, give me your jacket. She gone say something like, 'This wind is something else tonight, ain't it, baby?' And it's up to you to connect what they say to what they mean. A good woman wants to plant the idea in your head and make you think it was your idea the whole time. What you have to do is let her think that's what she's doing. Don't say nothing to your mama about this. She kill me if she know I'm telling you this.*

*And throughout the night, every time I looked at Janine, I strained my thoughts through my stepfather's advice trying to find hidden meaning in every gesture, anticipating demands. Her lips looked dry, so I went to get her a soda. When the action in the play intensified, I took her hands. When the play was over, she squeeze me as we walked through the heavy iron and glass doors.*

*That night, I watched her face while she was on top. I wondered if I was the man she imagined with her eyes shut. Her eyes were always pressed shut. I licked her eyelashes, making Janine laugh.*

*In August, she sat me down. Her boyfriend would be flying in from California. The boyfriend was probably going to ask the question. It was time for us to be friends, Janine said gently.*

Then it went all to hell. Something took over. I don't know what it was—perhaps a refusal to perform. A shutdown. I can't explain it. On the first report card, I was put on academic probation and on the second, I was kicked out of all extracurricular activities, including the Bridge Program. Roland warned me of idle hands. He took a day off from his job and marched me down to every single fast-food store, every Sears, every grocery store, to fill out applications. He was a big believer in the idle hands theory among young black men. All that was bad in the world could be placed on hands not in motion. All that rapping and spinning on your head and big gold link necklaces and gaudy sweatsuits—those ridiculous things existed because us black kids didn't keep our hands busy.

I hated to disappoint my mother, but she knew she had no power. Roland, my stepfather, a good guy, came into the picture too late to have any real influence. I simply nodded at his lectures. There was really nothing they could do except let it ride out and hope that I would survive intact.

I was in a pissy mood because we had lost a CYO game on account of me. Yeah, CYO. At the end of the game I let my man drive the baseline on me. This is a point of pride with me. Defense is the only thing I do well. I don't let guys drive baseline. Fucking tough little Jew bastard did just that. I couldn't imagine Jews playing hoops, but they did. And the bastards were good. I played for Sacred Heart, the local Catholic Church that fed bums and people even too lazy to go down to the welfare office and sign up. Every so often the priest forced Coach Phil to make us volunteer to feed the goddamn bums. That volunteerism ended when Pelham couldn't stop tripping bums as they walked away with a plate of food.

Too bad, so sad, Pelham would tell them when they wanted another serving. Of course, you weren't allowed to go

back for seconds so the bums got a little irate at this Pelham kid. Did Pelham give a fuck? Course not.

That night—it was a Thursday—we had just lost a CYO game to JCC. One-Time, our point guard, played like he hadn't touched a round ball in years. He must have handed the ball off ten times to this little pesky Jewish fucker. When he's not stealing, Baby Farrakhan is our skinny slick scorer from the outside, and the Jews knew it (they were the only team that actually scouted), so they double-teamed him, forcing the ball into Pelham's hand. So Pelham gets the ball. The game is in his hands, literally. As far as I'm concerned, Pelham is the best natural athlete in the entire school. I've seen him drink a quart of milk and then go out and dunk on college players, gashing his head against the rim. I've seen the guy crush a throng of bony-chested white boys from Central Catholic High in the mile run. Pelham played linebacker for two weeks, and went through Schenley High's entire back field depth chart in the first half. He quit two weeks later.

There's scouts out there who talk about Pelham like he's a fucking mythical creature, and that's because he is. He's all sinew and muscle and skullbone with no brains; he is a stupid little boy in a man's body. God is he stupid. And of course, he's dating my sister. He's the kind of guy that gets upset when the opponents play good defense. He sort of takes it personal. Anyway, Pelham didn't last the half. Two technicals and Pelham was out of the game.

As for myself, I'm a fair player all in all. Good first step. Don't miss too many layups. Can finish with the best of them. A solid three. A swingman with a nose for the ball. But if you ask me to be the leading scorer? The first option? Which Phil indeed asked, we'll lose every time because I'm not the man. Don't ever expect me to score. Consider it a bonus when I do.

The Jews killed us.

Good ole Coach Phil. Nice, red-headed Coach Phil. Phil wore the same pair of faded green corduroys and frayed, blue chambray collared shirt every game. It got so bad that Baby Farrakhan stole a new outfit for Phil. A really nice wool Polo sweater and a pair of thick herringbone trousers. Phil was so touched he about cried. To our disgust, he wore that new outfit to every game for the rest of the season. Fucking Phil the red-headed Catholic.

I wondered if only Jews were playing for JCC.

Anyways after losing the game, we lined up to take potshots at the JCC kids, but Phil came out and told us to go home.

No one wanted to go home. And no one had money to go to Vento's for hoagies or pizza. No one had ends for the upcoming weekend. And there was going to be a party at Chelsea College. The girls, rich girls from all over the Eastern seaboard, threw these banging parties and I used my Bridge program ID to get in. Out of the entire crew: One Time, Pelham, Baby Farrakhan, myself, and Turk Taliaferro, only Turk and I had been to the dorms of Chelsea College. Turk had a girl up there, and every so often, he took me along, mainly because I had been in classes with white people all my life. I also knew my way around Chelsea.

Turk always invited me up to Chelsea. Turk knew I could flow with the college kids. Turk could never take One Time, Pelham, or Baby Farrakhan—campus police would have been called within a few minutes. Actually, maybe Baby Farrakhan could get away with it, but he had a pimp stroll that he couldn't quite suppress. Anywhere else, Baby Farrakhan would have been invisible, but at Chelsea? Right.

If he tried to suppress his pimp stroll, shit would just bubble up in his gait. Baby could roll with the best pimp-strollers in the county. Should have seen his entrance to the after party for the Fresh Festival. Baby Farrakhan pimped in with this dark blue sheepskin, a matching homburg, and sky blue Cazels. Baby Farrakhan pimped so hard that on



every other step, the back of his left hand dusted the hardwood floor. Had my man from Houdini in disbelief, talking about you see this nigga here? And so I'm thinking, with a pimp like that, Baby Farrakhan wouldn't last five minutes alone at Chelsea. Can you imagine a parent coming to visit their precious daughter and seeing those three thugs pimping down the passageway in gaudy sheepskins?

"I'm starving," One-Time said as we walked home. But One-Time was always starving.

"Got any ends?" Pelham asked.

"If I did, I wouldn't be starving." One-Time was always hungry, but I knew that One-Time's dad had been laid off at the Homestead Works. He no longer paid full price for lunch tickets at the school. Pelham always had free lunch tickets and wasn't ashamed to pick them up. Baby Farrakhan had an executive's taste—he never ate school food. He went out for lunch even though it was against school rules. I used to buy tickets for school lunches until Mom found out that all of the white kids brought their lunch to school. She even began putting cut carrots in my lunches. Brainwashed my mother was. Somebody was going to bring it up, and it might as well be me. They would hint around it forever until I said something.

"All right, you guys want to go to the bank?"

"What took you so long?" Pelham asked in an irritated voice.

And that's why we were freezing our balls off on a Thursday night around the corner from this blade bar called the Tender Trap. It was the bank. The Tender Trap was an account that we tapped every other month or so. The Tender Trap was a goose that laid golden eggs. We discovered the Trap after CYO basketball practice when this blade mistakenly asked Pelham if he could suck him off. Well, that blade asked the wrong fucking guy. Pelham was pure liquid thug. Pelham had spent some time in a reform school so he was sensitive about those matters. Pelham was styling all up

in that blade. Pap pap, two three times before he hit the ground. Pap Pap. Pelham set his Timbs up to smash the blade's skull against the concrete curb, before we saved him.

The blade gave us all the money in his pocket. Something like five hundred dollars. We were like, damn. Why didn't you give us the money before Pelham beat the shit out of you? We've been tapping that well ever since. Even Turk was hardly impressed.

A year older than us, Turk was the undisputed head of the crew. He accompanied us once as we took funds out of the account and shook his head. There was no way he was going to bitch slap blades on Thursday nights for party money. Too uncouth. Plus, what comes around, goes around, Turk said, but I knew that he meant what goes around, comes around. Everyone knew Turk could decline tapping the blade bank, because he had graduated to bigger shit. That's what they said. When I told them they were full of shit, guys like Pelham told me that I was blind. That I looked up to Turk, that's why I couldn't see the obvious.

"You guys hitting that place too much. Lion," Turk advised. "You better tell the crew to chill."

How can you tell that to guys who had no money? The blades had loot in volume. You could just look at the cars parked around the corner from the Tender Trap: BMWs, Jags, Mercedes, Acuras, and a handful of Saabs. I mean, Christ, were they born like that or what? I had blade cousins and they weren't rich. They didn't drive around in cars like these blades. There should be a law against being soft and bladish and driving around in a butter ass BMW.

Anyway, it was Thursday night, big blade night at the Tender Trap. Blades parked their cars on adjacent streets for obvious reasons. What I was about to do made me feel bad, considering that there might be a couple of fellas just like us, lurking, waiting for one of my blade cousins, ready to jack them. But then again, my cousins weren't loaded like

the blades at the Tender Trap. My cousins weren't soft. My cousins didn't park nice BMWs on off streets so that the wife couldn't say, hey, did I see your car outside the blade bar last night?

Anyway, all we wanted was money for an outfit, a haircut, and a couple of forties of Coqui. Haircut and a good time was all. Was that too much to ask? We didn't think so.

One-Time looked out. The three of us—myself, Pelham and Baby Farrakhan—hid inside an alcove outside a military recruiting station around the corner from the Tender Trap. Blades would walk from the Trap to cars parked on off streets. One-Time would walk back and forth across the intersection until he saw a couple of blade marks. We never bounced just one blade. It didn't make economic sense. It was always better to bounce two. The ideal bounce were two middle-aged, well-dressed blades with eyeglasses. Knock the eyeglasses off and they can't see shit. We liked blades in nice suits. Or dress shirt and dress slacks with expensive shoes. But you never knew what was gonna come out of the Tender Trap. Rarely did we bounce blades of the same type. It could be a businessman and some slivery punk in a Black Flag t-shirt. It could be some skinny punk and some big diesel fuck. It could be some big diesel fuck and your AP English teacher, which is what happened to us a few months ago. Of course, we didn't bounce Mr. Tomas, but later on, after class, I warned him that he shouldn't be going to the Tender Trap—you never know who's walking by at the moment. I guess he thought I was blackmailing him, but I was trying to give the fucking blade some good advice.

Anyway, One-Time looked out. The reason that he was the lookout was because One-Time ran his mouth from ringpost to ringpost. On and on One-Time went. Which is how he got his name. "One time me and my brother were at this camp in West Virginia and the camp counselor taught me how to light my farts...One time in the sixth grade this crippled girl gave

blowjobs for a dollar a blow, and only two guys could afford it..." On and on One-Time would go. Baby Farrakhan had heard enough: "You're gonna make a great lookout. You can talk as much as you want."

Eventually, One-Time became a great lookout. He had all kinds of signals and walks that let us know exactly what was up. A veritable Jimmy Leyland. A touch of the ballcap meant one blade. Sideways ballcap meant "feasible, but hardly the ideal". Reverse ballcap meant "two blades very soft, very loaded, on their way. Get in position and have Pelham warm up his bitch slap."

Not too long ago, One-Time absolutely fucking sucked as a lookout. I mean, the fucking guy couldn't tell a Hugo Boss suit from a fucking Men's Wearhouse suit on the discount rack from fifty feet. He couldn't tell the difference between Florsheims, Cole Haans, and Payless specials. Baby Farrakhan, the only natural criminal among us, taught One-Time everything he knew. Took him to the stores downtown. Gave him the passion. Now, One Time could glance at downtown blade and come to a retail figure within ten dollars. He was that good.

For his part, Baby Farrakhan was only part time. Baby Farrakhan kept his whistle whetted with little squirts of lip Vaseline. He had other gigs, and like me, he bounced blades when he was bored, or because we lost a CYO game to Jewish kids from Squirrel Hill. His criminal enterprise kept Baby Farrakhan from being full-time. His biggest score occurred last Fall. For two weeks he took half price orders on Kaufmann's fall line. One hundred dollars was the minimum order. Cheap motherfuckers would try to give him twenty dollars and say, get whatever you can. Baby Farrakhan put his hands up in innocence. "I don't know what you talking about, my brother."

From what we heard, Baby Farrakhan rented a truck with his brother. Parked it in a downtown alley then went shopping half an hour before closing. When Kaufmanns closed

that night, he and his brother emerged from a garbage bin and cleaned out the entire line of name brands. He used the same bins he hid in. It was easily a five thousand dollar score. In a matter of hours, Baby Farrakhan had changed the direction of fashion at school. He had altered the course of the fashion arms race. Project kids at school were now dressed like GQ models. Of course, two weeks later, their shit was dirty or greasy or their older brothers and sisters had worn it to a club, where it was left or stolen. You know how niggas do. But for two weeks, everybody was fucking fly as hell. And here he was just like us, bouncing blades for fun. He probably had a fold of hundreds in his pocket.

I saw One-Time jaywalk in a nuanced pimp stroll. That meant a narc car was coming.

"Narc!" I shouted. We quickly began walking in the other direction until the narc passed. What were narcs doing outside the Tender Trap anyway?

When the narc car was gone we went back to our posts. I got to thinking.

Turk was probably up at Chelsea helping his girl Betty organize the party. No, he was probably banging his girl Betty. I had known Turk for four years, since I was thirteen and he was fourteen. He had been getting ass pretty much on a constant basis for all four of those years. It was amazing. I didn't understand. I had gotten no ass. I shook my head. Maybe one of those Chelsea girls would take pity on me after the party tomorrow.

Goddamn blades. Come outside so we can get this over with.

The narcs got me to thinking. What were they doing in these parts? For sure they weren't looking for us. Five-Oh was a different story. If the cops caught us, they were pretty cool about it. If the blades would complain or get wise, the cops would just say hey, they're kids. You want this on their record? Then five-oh would talk under their breath. They wouldn't be trying to jump you if you weren't

blade in the first place. That would usually squash it. The blades would complain a little more, but that would usually be about it.

Of course, we were kids only in that we were juveniles. We weren't kids by any stretch of the imagination. We were lanky, muscular fighting machines. We'd make bets.

I'll drop that blade with two shots.

I'll drop that blade with one.

Okay, drop that blade.

We had been practicing all our lives. Fighting was a perfectly ordinary part of life, like taking a dump or making your bed before you leave the house. Nothing to bat an eye at. It was like taking a swig of a forty, leaving Dorito crumbs floating at the surface, then handing the forty back to your boy and watching him drink up. It was a joke. It was like going to the store for Moms. And the blades were usually nice enough not to fight back. They just gave up the goods. And so, we were nice enough to give them their wallets back with everything except the cash. Haircut and a good time.

Sometimes they fought back. It happened occasionally. But if they did fight back, which was rare, we perfected a beating that was scary, but didn't leave permanent scars. Pelham, that bastard, would slap the blade so hard that said blade would fall to the ground. Like his legs were made of cardboard. Pelham slapped so hard that even I flinched. Pelham slapped so hard that the blade would whimper and hold up his wallet, as if to say, take this shit please. Pelham, that bastard, was hard and black with a number-one shave all around. He weighed about one-seventy, but looked like he weighed two-twenty. Pelham, who was normally extremely good-natured, had it in for blades. They offended him because of his stint in reform school.

Pelham had these Asiatic eyes that he would use to stare down at the blade with pure hostility. His hands were hard and calloused. He perfected the hit to a series of

short complicated procedures. Pelham was doctor who performed the same surgery on different patients time and time again.

Goddamn blades come out and play. One-Time turned his hat sideways. Two soft blades with shirts tucked in. I shook my head.

Spring in Rivertown is still winter as far as I'm concerned. It was nippy as hell so everybody, except One-Time, was inside the doorway of a recruiting station around the corner from the Tender Trap. It was a good place to wait. We waited inside the doorway, away from the wind and biting snowflakes. Spring. I just stood there looking inside the recruiting station while waiting for some poor blade to come along. There were Uncle Sam posters with him pointing at you. There were Marine posters with a guy who looked like he could beat the shit out of you. I remembered that the army guy would come to high school and talk to the mainstream students, but not to the smart students in the prep classes. Only fucking yinzer white boys with puffy, dirty Steeler jackets joined the service.

Even though my grades were shitty, they continued to let me stay in the prep classes, despite being kicked out of the Bridge Program. I think my presence made them feel comfortable. It was my last semester and I guess the director of the program thought I would get eaten alive by the wolves in the mainstream classes. Little did he know that I was one of the wolves.

Goddamn it was cold.

So I was looking at the posters. They really were nice posters. Old school with the exotic locales. The little blue sailor suits with the bell bottoms. I thought about it a moment. If we had any of those guys in town, we would beat them like blades. Maybe worse. Except maybe the Marine with the thick neck. He looked like a killer. He'd give Pelham a good run. But the Marine had a gun. We didn't have guns. What were they for? Guys who did have guns couldn't fight

anyway. How could you call yourself tough if you went around with a gun and couldn't fight?

It was cold as hell and I was tired of waiting. I wanted the blades to hurry up and come on out. A car went by slow and it might have been a blade spy. A nice Honda with leather seats—definitely not a narc car. The blades were looking out for themselves. Who's going to look out for them? Five-Oh despised blades.

Okay, fuck this. Jesus it was cold. I'd rather be warm and broke than freezing and flush.

We should have left right then. Pelham, who's the first nigga to get too cold, or too warm, or whatever, was the first to say something. Despite being the hardest and the blackest and the dumbest, Pelham's also the most sensitive. Fucking Goldilocks Pelham is. Let's get some white boys, Pelham demanded. And he looked at me. It was a question dressed up as a demand. Turk sort of left me in charge while he was gone. Or maybe it was just guys naturally looked to me because Turk always asked my advice in front of the crew.

I looked at Pelham as if he were stupid. There ain't much difference between bouncing white boys and bouncing blades. It's the recourse. When white boys call the police, niggas go to jail. I wasn't ready to go jail for anyone, blade, white boy, whatever. And that's what I told Pelham as we continued waiting for a blade.

The thing was, if I wanted money, I pretty well could have had it. Mom had money from Dad dying in the service. There was that money, plus the check that came every month. I'm glad she didn't marry one of them smooth talking niggas from uptown. She got herself a hard-working church man who had his own money. Though I didn't like or listen to Roland (okay except for his clothing advice), I still respected him. Though I would never tell him that. Roland had plenty of money. I used to get a really nice allowance, but Roland convinced Mom to stop. He said she was rewarding me. With my grades, I didn't deserve an allowance. Of course, he was



right. I ought to get a job, learn the value (he pronounced it val-ya) of a dollar. Of course, I didn't get a job. I just bounced more blades. They were my allowance. When I continued bringing home new sneakers, Roland went through my stuff looking for drugs. He had been watching too many commercials and thought I was a drug dealer.

Goddamn blades, hurry up. The concrete got cold. The wind shifted and whipped inside the recruiting station doorway enclosure. Cold seeped into my high-top shell toes. And the tips of my fingers were numb. I could wait another week for a haircut. Did I really need to go to another college party? Shit, I needed to take the SAT in a few weeks. All kinds of shit. I started to say fuck it, this is a loser, let's jet, when I looked in One-Time's direction.

One-Time crossed the intersection, walking towards me, and in a deft movement, took his cap off and placed it backwards on his head. I even detected a faint smirk on One-Time's face. I bet he could almost taste the Vento's pizza. Two blades turned the corner and walked in our direction. They were five or six paces behind One-Time.

I walked out first, in the direction of the oncoming blades. I passed One-Time without a gesture of recognition or the blades might think something was up. Pelham had already crossed to the other side of the street, as if he had better things to do. The dumb son of bitch couldn't execute a simple basketball play, but he sure knew how to set up the blades. In about one minute, Pelham would turn back and deliver a devastating smack to the side of the blade's head. Baby Farrakhan walked the farthest away, dipping the entire time, looking out for the cops. His lips were moistened so that he could issue a shrill whistle in the coldest weather.

I looked up to catch a glimpse of the blades. They had to be the softest looking blades I'd ever seen, one short and doughy, round glasses and hairline that had receded so far back you probably could see it from the back. The other

blade was thin with dark gelled hair slicked back. He hung back, his eye roving. I saw his eye line run from Pelham, to One-Time to me, heading right in his direction.

I got a weird feeling. Every other time, the blades were too horny and drunk to notice anything around them. This guy looked like he was soldiering. I should have called it off—I really didn't need the money, but I knew for a fact that One-Time and Pelham were broke as hell. I could do one of two things. I could make contact or not.

They had to be the softest looking blades I had ever seen. Oh, what the hell.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you have the time?"

The young doughy blade didn't seem startled at all. He pulled the sleeve of his long coat as if he had been waiting for this question.

The skinny blade with the gelled back hair took a few steps back and surveyed the area. His eyes lit up when he saw Pelham crossing the street in a light jog. He may have even smirked.

"It's quarter after eleven," the doughy guy remarked.

"Thanks" I said, moving on. Something about the skinny guy hanging back, soldiering, surveying. I didn't like it. I walked past the blades and turned towards Pelham. I shook my head and made the cut off sign. Pelham pretended not to see me. I made the cut off sign again, but nothing.

Pelham accelerated and landed a dazzling smack to the head of the doughy blade. The blade tucked his chin in his chest and covered his head tightly, his face contorted. Pelham's blow fell with a hard smack, but was deflected by the blade's forearm. The force of the blow was strong enough to send the blade to the ground. While the victim was on the ground, One-Time and I circled back, trapping the blades on the sidewalk.

"Give that shit up," Pelham demanded.

"What's your problem, man?" the doughy guy said.

"You got something that belong to me."

"I don't even know—" Pelham slapped him hard across the face. Then again. The doughy boy looked at his partner.

"What do you want?"

"What I want? Give me your goddamn wallet. And this watch." Pelham snatched it from his hand.

Pelham thrust the cash in his pocket as we began walking briskly away. Pelham stared at us. I heard a rapid shuffle of feet.

One-Time squinted. "Who's that?"

"Baby. He's running away."

"Why?"

"I don't know," I said, "but it can't be good."

The situation wasn't good. After Baby Farrakhan ran, several squad cars barreled in, boxing us next to the recruiting station. I hoped that maybe One-Time had gotten away, but I saw two cops on either side of his down-headed loping gate. Pelham tried to tell the cops that the blades had made an indecent proposal, but a skinny uniform with a fat, glowing head looked hard.

"You calling my colleagues homosexuals?" he sneered.

Pelham answered with a quizzical look. "Huh?" Another uniform laughed. This cop had a baby-face, but swore like a hardened criminal.

"You fucks, you're boy couldn't make these two as undercovers. Hey Tommy, check his ankles."

Pelham and I were frisked and cuffed by Tommy. The two undercovers stood back, the tall one with the gelled up hair helped dust Dough Boy off. I could make out a red mark roughly in the shape of a hand. Dough Boy saw me looking. "What the fuck you looking at?" I looked towards the ground and suppressed a laugh. Dough Boy was mad at me because I had seen him get bitch slapped.

"If you boys had followed politics, you'd know they got a pole-smoker on city council. You fellas got too greedy. These people finally complained to ears that listen and here

we are. You guys are like crack heads, can't stay away can you? And this one"—he gestured towards Pelham—"this kid slaps like a goddamn balpeen hammer."

"Was that a punch?" Dough Boy asked.

"It was a smack."

Dough Boy shifted his jaw back and forth. "Goddamn that kid. Felt like a fucking knockout punch."

The officers continued laughing and talking, but for me, it seemed like the end of the world when they took me downtown to the booking station. What would I tell Mom? What would I tell Roland? Just a few months ago, it seemed as if I might make it to college. Now, I would have a juvenile record. We tried to tell the policemen at central booking how old we were, but they laughed at us again. They didn't care if we were thirteen.

We were scared out of our minds. One-Time cried like a blubbering baby. He called for his mama the entire time. Pelham should have been more scared than anyone else, after all, he had hit an officer. Every time we went through a procedure in the station, Pelham announced to everyone in the room that he was seventeen.

"Pelham, it doesn't matter how old you are. You're still going to go through the same process as everyone else.

"You mean they're not going to call my parents and let me go?"

"No man, they want to scare us. They're gonna keep us here tonight."

Then I saw something that I thought I'd never see. Pelham began to cry.

I must admit, besides the drunks and the nasty old drug addicts, it wasn't so bad. I thought I'd get one phone call, but that was bullshit. Since we were juveniles the policeman called the parents. If it had been up to me, I would have called Janine.

Pelham, One-Time, and myself huddled together until morning. One-Time was the first to go. I'm sure his parents, both Seventh Day Adventists, wore his ass out on the way to the family sedan. Pelham didn't know who his real parents were. He lived with seven other foster kids in a large ramshackle Garfield home. They wouldn't even notice that Pelham was missing. When the policeman opened up our holding cell, for some reason, I could tell he was coming for me. He called my name and I told Pelham goodbye.

The worst part was waking up early in the morning and watching Roland and Mom sign forms so I could be released to their recognizance. The look on my mother's face. She couldn't imagine that her baby could have anything to do with it. And Roland, though he was upset at using a sick day from his boiler job, was almost satisfied. He had warned my mother time and time again, and now here was the evidence of things predicted. I was no longer the good kid whom you could make excuses for. I was officially a juvenile delinquent. Even my sister had shown up, not for my sake, but for Pelham. "Where's Darren?" she whispered. Rawenna was the only person who called Pelham by his first name. My parents heard the whisper and looked at her as if she were possessed by a demon. Dumb fucking Pelham banging my older sister.

My parents didn't say a word to me. They only asked me what happened. I told them what happened. What I was doing. And Roland, to his credit, didn't get all self satisfied. He only nodded when I answered his questions. We got home and sat down at the dinner table. Mom and Roland looked at me for a few minutes, making me squirm in my chair. Roland began.

"Your mother and I have come to an agreement about this situation, Lion. We think that you have been acting like a man and you deserve the chance to live your life as a man. We had a conversation about this last summer, and I thought it took holt, but it didn't take holt at all. You want to go

out and get bad grades, beat up faggots, and act like a delinquent, that's your business to do. But you won't do it here."

Are they kicking me out of the house?

"Here's the conditions if you want to stay in this here house. First, you finish high school. We thought you was college material, but that just ain't the case. It ain't no crime in not being college material, trust me on that one. You finish high school and I can get you into the apprentice program at work. All the white boys do it. So we gone do it too. It's hard work, but it's a good honest living. If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for you."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Second, you stay out of trouble. Won't be no hanging out with your hoodlum friends. Them boys bound to come to a bad end. They ain't got no choice, but you got a choice. You got parents that care about you.

Okay, that made sense.

Third, you gets a job. I don't care what. I don't care where. Remember when you put in them applications? I got a message from the manager of Chicken Plantation. I've already called them back and made an appointment for an interview..."

*Chicken Plantation?* I continued nodding, but I had tuned him out. *Chicken Plantation?*

"You going to be moving out as soon as you graduate. We need your room for the baby." *Baby?*

"What baby?"

"You gonna be an uncle, Lion. Me and your mother gone be—"

"Pelham?"

My mother cried out. "He's ruined her. She hates me. She hates me and now she's pregnant by that hoodlum." Now I knew why Roland and Mom seemed so calm. Okay, I got caught trying to rob blades. That would eventually go away. But dumb fucking Pelham and my sister having a baby? That's

another story; that's eternal. That baby would have a dumb father for the rest of its life. Fucking Pelham.

On my second day at Chicken Plantation, I was reprimanded for not properly addressing customers. Brian, the assistant manager, took me to the back room. Frozen gizzards lay on the cold, burgundy tiles. Brian was a black guy in his mid-thirties, and despite the heavy metal tattoos spread over his shoulders and forearms, he took his job very seriously. Apparently, he was up for Straw Boss, plantation talk for Store Manager.

"Okay, Lion, let's go over it one more time. Female adult orders Down Home Darkie Special with extra sauce, a side of corn on the cob, and mashed potatoes and gravy?" I tried to remember orientation.

"That's a wonderful selection—"

"Too articulate. White folks will resent you for taking their order. Try it again.

"That's a wonderful choice?"

"Drop some syllables."

"Thas a won'erful choice?"

"Come on, sound like you enjoy service. Emphasize the wonderful."

"Thas a won'erful choice!"

"Much better! Keep going."

"Thas a won'erful choice, Ma'am—"

"What do we call adult women again?"

"Sorry. That's a won'erful choice, Missy. What kind of drink would you like with that?"

"Drop that last syllable and we're in a good shape. I like you, Lion. I think you're going to make a good field hand. You just have to learn to play the game a little bit. In a few years, you'll be making some serious money. Tonight, I'll take you through entrée and side preps. But for now, take a break and get out there and straighten up the front room. I gotta make the shift deposit."

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. Sweep the floor and wipe down the tables."

"Oh."

I did as I was told and then went to the outhouse to take a piss, and as I urinated, I thought that my life could not be, or get, worse; I spent the day slogging through high school classes that I dreaded more every single fucking day. Mornings and early afternoons were crammed with classes that I had blown off for years. Because I was no longer in the prep classes my requirements increased dramatically. I had to take all the shitty filler course work like Business Math, Health & Welfare, and Machinery Electronics.

An hour after school ended, I was dressed like a little antebellum valet for my evenings at Chicken Plantation. They gave us black knickers and a white shirt puffed at the wrists. I worked the swing shift from four-thirty to eleven thirty. At eleven thirty, we cleaned like crazy for the oncoming night shift—a crazed crew of speed-taking cut-ups. My life: cooking and cleaning diseased chickens; scooping fries out of a vat of vile grease that kitchen hands wouldn't change for days on end. (Brian told us that changing too often led to "flavor loss.") My skin grew pale. I was no longer the amber-colored, nice kid from around the neighborhood. I was sickly child. My eyes were yellowed. My belly would have been distended had it not been for all the chicken I was eating. The smell of chicken, old grease, and smoke came from my pores like steam from a teapot. I'd come home from work late and night and find my sheets changed, with a handwritten note from my mother reminding me to shower before I went to bed. My acne was so bad that my sister looked in my face one afternoon and said, "I'm gonna pop your zits and eat my cereal with all your zit juice." That's what pregnancy does to sisters. And what future fathers like Pelham might have on a mother's mental state. Pelham had no money, no insurance, and no parental skills. Pelham was an athlete who couldn't stick to the same sport



for more than two weeks. The best thing he had going was that devastating smack. I told her that a demon-child was growing inside her. But that was all I could muster before heading off to work where I served customers with manners so egregious, so false, that Butterfly McQueen would have been humiliated.

I looked at my watch. Thirty seconds until my break would be over. I looked at the mirror and saw the reflection of a very tired, very ugly boy who was quickly becoming a piece of shit man. Customers had already asked if Brian and I were related. I pulled on a couple of nose hairs (nothing better to do) when I heard the muffled sound of loud, angry, combative voices. Maybe someone was having an argument with the couple of customers, which I had just learned, was a strict violation of Dixie policy. But it happened all the time, some knucklehead would eat the entire chicken thigh down to the sinew and bone, and then slam the bones down on the counter demanding their money back. Ouch. That one hurt.

I opened the door slightly and heard more clearly. Two voices. One voice bristled with authority and violence. My heart dropped as this voice made the situation clear.

"You see this here? You want one in the head, you fat chicken eating motherfucker? Well then, I advise you to get the fuck on the floor. All ya'll chicken motherfuckers, get your ass in the freezer with them...them chicken outfits on.

Another voice gave orders to the man with the booming voice. "Get them herded up in the freezer. I'm gone take care of this nigga with the tattoos. Yeah you, nigga. You gone give us problems, my brother?"

I eased the door shut and listened. That second voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

"Sir, I will not give you any problems," Brian said, adding, "Take everything in the cash registers, I won't give you any problems."

"Ain't the cash register I want. Nigga, you know I want that safe."

"That is a time-lock safe, sir. There is--"

"What time it open?"

"Not for another hour--"

Brian barely got the last word out before I heard a tremendous crack, like the sound of an avalanche beginning to sound through the snow-filled canyons. I heard Brian let out a woozy wail. I flinched, not because Brian had been struck, but because I knew the *modus operandi*, the hard slap.

Pelham.

"What you say, nigga?"

"Don't kill me."

"Safe?"

"It's open now. I got to close it in another minute or the police will be here. Please don't kill me," Brian pleaded.

I heard his partner speak. "Somebody missing. They supposed to have eight people working. I only count seven."

"Check the bathroom. I'm a get that money."

Shit. I prepared myself. Pelham wouldn't kill me, but this guy might. I didn't have time to think about it much, because his partner kicked open the door and pointed a gun to my head. My hands went straight up. Pelham's partner was small, thin, and dangerous looking. Despite the ski mask, I could make out a bony, chiseled face and a head in the shape of question mark.

"Nigga what you doing?" he asked in a fluty voice.

"Using the bathroom?"

"Smart nigga be a kilt nigga. Get to the freezer."

Pelham stooped over the safe as I was escorted to the freezer in back. The other workers inside the freezer were in a state of panic. Maria held hands with Shimekia and Chablis and prayed loudly over loud sobs of fear. Quarles and Johnson sat against a tray of frozen sides. Quarles had a large round stain in crotch of his pants. He had pissed

himself. Johnson's body quivered as he held his face in both hands. Mr. George, the white, forty-five year old retarded man, shifting from foot to foot.

"Lion, we get robbed by bad men?"

"Yes, Mr. George."

"Lion, they hurt Brian, huh?"

"Yes. Mr. George, but he'll be okay."

"Lion, they shoot us?"

"No, Mr. George."

"Lion?"

"Yes, Mr. George?"

"How you know for sure?"

"They came for the money, they didn't come to kill us."

"I believe you, Lion. You say everything okay, I know everything okay." His thumb went back into his mouth. Mr. George and I had gone through orientation together. Now, in time of crisis, that brief period together was enough for Mr. George to seek my assurance.

Two seconds later, we heard a pistol report, igniting a second round of panic. Maria prayed more loudly, the sobs wailed higher, and Mr. George, still sucking his thumb, shifted weight from foot to foot more rapidly. Mr. George looked over to me as a baby does when someone strange enters the room. The freezer door opened and Pelham and his partner tossed a conscious Brian onto the floor. Brian curled up into a ball, screaming as blood spread across the tile floor.

"Now try something and see what happens," the partner added, trying too hard to be brutal.

Pelham began to survey the room. I looked down because I knew his Asiatic eyes would settle on me. My best chance was to pretend I didn't recognize Pelham. Stupid fucking Pelham.

"What's wrong?" his partner asked.

Pelham said nothing. That's it. He's looking at me, I thought.

The bony-faced gunman made his way around the freezer, stopping at each of my fellow employees. He stepped over Brian, who was writhing on the floor holding his left hand to his chest. Pelham remained silent. "Ya'll come out this freezer, we gone kill every one of ya'll, understand?" He registered everyone's terror, and satisfied, went on to the next, until he got to me.

"You still a smart nigga?"

I refused to look him in the eye. I felt the gun in my direction, the barrel's shadow across my temple. I shook my head, no.

"I didn't think so."

He continued walking. Thank God, I thought. He stopped at Mr. George. The small skinny gunman playfully touched every temple with his gun, eliciting cries of terror that, beneath the ski mask, he obviously enjoyed. Mr. George still had a stupid grin on his face.

"What the fuck you grinning at, chicken man?"

Mr. George continued to grin. "It's okay, mister. Lion said you wouldn't hurt us."

"What?"

"Lion say you won't hurt us."

"Who the fuck is Lion?" the gunmen looked around. I could tell he was hoping it was me.

"He is," George said, pointing to me.

Oh God. The freezer door opened. Pelham was back.

"Let's go."

The gunman hesitated a moment—he wanted to exercise his brutality—then decided against it. He left with Pelham. Everyone in the room exhaled with relief, except for Mr. George who firmly believed that nothing would happen to him. Maria let out a rapid prayer:

"Oh Lord Jesus on High thank you for the protection and grace for i h  
a ve walked through the valley of death and i fear not evil..."

The police came while we were standing in a formed circle, our hands clutched, our heads bowed in prayer. I

looked up during the prayer. All eyes were closed, except Brian's. He looked directly at me.

"The manager noticed that everyone seemed petrified except you, Lion. Why weren't you scared like everyone else? Did you know something?"

It was the next day. This voice belonged to a grizzled Detective Abrams. He had a short close-cropped afro, studded with gray at the temple and his critical eyes looked right through me. He wore a crisp white shirt, gray flannel slacks, and shoes shined at the tips. When Roland opened the door, he recognized a brother in style and grace, if not in blood. Roland liked the man immediately and sweetly asked my mother to make some coffee.

I tried to turn away from all that coffee breath. Roland on one side. Detective Roy Abrams, who led me like a dog on a leash, on the other.

"No, sir."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sure."

"Lion, you don't have to call me sir. I'm a friend. If not quite a friend, then let me be your friend. I want to help you. But you have to help me help you. What comes around, goes around." Where had I heard that one?

"Why don't you tell Detective Abrams what they want to know?" my stepfather asked.

Why don't you get me a lawyer? I thought.

"Because I don't know anything."

"Sure ya do," the detective responded. His eyes sparkled at the thought of mining nuggets of information. He had done this for years and enjoyed it tremendously.

"No, I don't"

"Sure ya do."

We were at the dining table. My mother poured the detective another cup of coffee. She stood over his shoulder

glaring at me, as if I had robbed the plantation myself. Was I a bad nigga?

"Boy, you better start answering this man's questions if you want to stay in this house." Even my mother was turning against me. Detective Abrams motioned for my mother to ease up a bit on the boy.

"It's okay, ma'am. Your son is a good boy. I can tell these things" -then looking at me- "but you don't want it to get any worse."

"Look, mister, I didn't do anything."

"Yes ya did. You got criminal friends. You beat up them homosexuals."

"You're not supposed to know about that," I cried.

"I'm a detective, young man. I'm supposed to know. Anyway, you stole from them. Stealing. You hear me? We got you on that one. Then, your Dad here goes out of his way to get you back on the right track. Gets you a good job. Tries to put down some guidelines. He wants you to fly right. Am I wrong, Mr. Roland?"

"No, sir," Roland said quickly, as if he were in church. The detective continued. His grizzled face loomed large. Though he sat in the same place, Abrams seemed to take up the entire room, breathing in all the oxygen, slowly asphyxiating me.

"You start working at the restaurant, and on your second week, they get robbed. Okay, Lion, that's a coincidence. Another coincidence is your background. You the only one in that restaurant with a record. Now the robbers come. They wave their guns around. They pistol whip your boss, put a gun to everyone's temple. Everybody at this restaurant is scared to death, except you. Why is that? Everyone is cowering, praying. Except you. And here you are slick as a seal, cool as a cucumber, telling me you don't know nothing. You even told a fellow employee that they weren't going to kill anyone. That they only wanted to rob

the place. I got all these arrows and they all pointing at you. What you want me to do? Ignore the obvious?"

"I didn't want Mr. George to freak out, okay?"

"Okay that's cool...on its own. But when I add up the facts, when I put the fact in context, it ain't cool no more. As a detective, I got to ask myself if you got something to do with it. I got to go through protocol. And that protocol goes through you. Understand?"

I nodded my head.

"I see this two ways, Lion. The first way is this: You're basically a good kid who made some stupid choices for friends. That can happen, okay? The second way I see it is this: You're an accessory to an armed robbery. You the inside man and we both know it. That's five automatic. Okay, charges might not stick, but you never know. But you don't look like the gambling type to me. You can gamble and if you lose, that's five automatic, homeboy. Now do you want to take that kind of chance?"

I wanted to faint.

"Now this is the important part and I want you to listen up real good. You can try to be hard like those dumb niggas out there" -he gestured towards the window- "or you can act like you know. Tell me what I know you know and you won't ever have to see me again. You won't have to step into a courtroom. This conversation never happened."

My sister walked in at that moment. Her stomach bulged out of her small t-shirt. Rawenna saw Detective Abrams and immediately detected trouble.

"What did Lion do this time?"

"Girl, would you please go back to your room," my mother pleaded.

"Okay, okay." She left, waddling back to her room, a glass of milk in her hand. My sister left and the attention was back on me.

"So what's it gonna be, Lion?"

Fucking Pelham. Of all the banks, of all the fast food joints, of all the great places to rob, his dumb ass had to rob the Plantation...while I was at work. What kind of sense did that make? What was he thinking? Fucking Pelham. I know what I was thinking. I could try to save Pelham's ass. At least he'd be around for my sister's baby. But what would that do? He's stupid. Surely, he'd get into trouble again. Hell, if he would have backed off the undercover blades, then neither of us would be in this predicament. A little time in prison would give my sister time to find someone else. Plus, I couldn't imagine Pelham as a father. He's the kind of guy who would leave her inside the car while he played summer basketball. Hell, I'd be doing my sister a favor. Pelham would end up doing something stupid later on down the road anyway.

"I didn't have anything to do with it, but I recognized one of the voices."

Abrams smiled wide enough for me to notice a black gap where his incisor should have been.

A few days later, I found Turk at Scaife in his girlfriend's dorm. Turk lay on his back in Shelly's small bed, while Shelly straddled him. I saw the bottom of Turk's shell-toes framed by Shelly's beautiful backside sitting on his torso. I had always loved Shelly in the way the younger brother always loves his big brother's girlfriend, in the hope that one day, after being tortured for years, the younger brother could return the favor by banging big brother's girlfriend. And Shelly would do anything for me, after all, I was just like the baby brother she never had.

"Talk, my brother," Turk said.

I talked. I told him everything. From blade work gone bad, to the Plantation field-handism, to Pelham's poor job in casing joints, to his blood-thirsty partner, to Mr. George's waddling retardation, to Brian staring at me with



hatred, to Detective Abrams soaking me for information like a roller squeezing water from a wet rag

Shelly was hunched over Turk's expansive body—he was growing larger every day—plucking ingrown hairs from Turk's disappearing neck. I'd get going on a nice little narrative, only to be interrupted by Shelly, who was hunched over digging for follicular gold, pulling with a pair of tweezers

Turk listened. Shelly plucked. I spilled.

"Done," Shelly said, satisfied.

Turk sat up, his eyes sleepy. "I'm a tell you right now. You in danger, my brother. Serious danger."

"From Pelham?"

"No, from Pelham's partner."

"But I don't know him."

"Don't matter, my brother, he know you."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"How?"

"I know."

Turk told me that Pelham's partner was Omar McGriff, a boyhood friend that Pelham came to know in a foster home. McGriff had grown up extremely hard. He had an extensive juvenile record and came to neighborhood, and police fame, when he walked onto the middle of an Ozanam basketball game, pulled out a gun in the middle of the court, and began shooting in the air. He was fifteen. McGriff operated in a world where one could do business based on past misdeeds, where murdering someone, anyone, was like a scout badge. It had probably been McGriff's idea, Turk explained, to rob the Chicken Plantation, not Pelham. And Pelham probably felt terrible for not casing the joint better. How could he know that his friend, his future baby's uncle would be working at the fast food restaurant that he was robbing?

McGriff did not have a body to his credit, and so was looking for one. I was a prime candidate for accreditation.

"You're kidding," I asked

"It's a good thing Pelham didn't tell McGriff that he knew you." I thought about that statement for a moment. It sent a chill down my spine.

"You think he's looking for me?" I asked.

Turk looked to the ceiling for a moment, his neck still red from plucking.

"You say your sister came into the kitchen?"

"Yes."

"And you think she knows that that guy was a policeman?"

"No doubt."

"Then we have to assume that she told Pelham." Every logical choice was more and more distressing. Turk continued the logic until the conclusion.

"And then we have to assume that Pelham told McGriff. And then we have to assume that McGriff is looking for you."

"Oh God."

I walked home from Scaife, thinking twenty dollars could get me a Greyhound ticket to Detroit. It was a twenty-minute walk from Shelly's dorm to my home in East Liberty. The easiest route would take me through our old CYO stomping grounds, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, and the Tender Trap where we had once vicked blades left and right, and now here I was, looking over my shoulder, waiting to be vicked myself. Basketball season was over, so there was no reason to think that Pelham might be around. Or McGriff. Jesus, why didn't I just listen to Roland? I wouldn't have to worry about being McGriff's first body.

The day had been cold and rainy, nasty even for Rivertown. Rivertown in springtime—how does that sound? I wore my large, hooded waterproof jacket over a red wool sweater. Green corduroys and duck shoes. My toes began to numb. What had begun as such a promising year was now a test for survival. The police needed to catch McGriff before

McGriff caught me. This was a small city, and sooner or later, McGriff would catch me. How did it come to that?

And then something caught my eye. I stood in the puddle and smiled. I must have seen it everyday and never noticed until now. I looked to my left, and there it was, my freedom ticket, the military recruiting station.

No fucking way, I said to myself, smiling. I had never thought of it, but here was the answer to all my problems. It was late, about ten o'clock. The station was empty of course. But I liked it like this. No sergeants outside taking a smoke, looking at you through narrow slits, sizing you up for boot camp. I could stand at the window like a shopper looking at clothes. But instead of clothes, I looked at the posters.

Army.

Navy.

Air Force.

Marines.

The Army. I had never liked that "Be all that you can be" theme. The idea of getting up early and slogging through a field, getting into a tank, parachuting out of planes, getting more stuff done before 9am than what most people would get done in a day. Uh uh. Not for the kid. Plus, there were a couple of guys who joined the Army and then came back to school wearing those cheesy green and brown uniforms as if they had already done something special. They showed off their little three-month medals. I didn't understand how you can have medals after only finishing boot camp. I didn't like those guys before they were in the Army, and I certainly didn't like them now. Ixnay the Arm-ay.

The Navy. Except for those faggot uniforms they seemed all right. The posters were kind of cool. The long lean sailor in blue, looking out on the horizon with a bag slung over his shoulder. He reminded me of Steve McQueen. There was another poster: a blonde in her beau's blue sailor top with that gleam in her eye like she had just been banged-

that was sort interesting. Another poster advertised exotic, alluring ports of calls—very alluring for a black kid from Rivertown. I could imagine myself chilling out on a beach in the South Seas drinking from a coconut, palm trees swaying in the breeze. But then, all these guys from high school had joined up because of Top Gun, the world's cheesiest movie, expecting to hop off a motorcycle and jump in a plane like it's parked in your backyard. Yeah right.

Air Force. Now these guys had style. They seemed sharp, business-like. The uniforms were dull blue. They all looked like bus drivers, but they did fix planes and fly them. Cool. This poster advertised dorm-style living in high-class hotels in Turkey. Posts in Europe, the Far East, and America. Now I could live like that.

The Marines. These guys looked pretty fucking hard, like they meant business. They didn't advertise exotic locales, or dorm-style living. They advertised a hard-assed drill instructor and a tough time. I felt the pulse of patriotism for a brief spell, before it fell away to dorm-style living, and posts in Europe, the Far East, and America.

Air Force here I come.

The next day I sat before a skeptical air force master sergeant. Master Sergeant Schayes had a state map posted on the wall behind him. The rest of the wall had been dedicated to the career of Master Sergeant Milton Schayes: Photographs of himself accepting medals from generals with even more medals than Schayes himself. Another large photo, taken years ago, of Schayes seated in an open cockpit. A family photo with two blond-headed boys in flight suits. Schayes rotated his chair sideways and looked down at my high school transcript and back up to me.

"Well, the high school grades are fair. We like the courses you were taking, but the grades are far from ideal. There is a steady decline from your first year in high

school. Not a good sign." Schayes seemed to speak to my transcripts and ASVAB scores on his desk, and not to me. "Your ASVAB scores are, to be sure, intimidating, which surprises me a bit. With this ASVAB, I can offer you some quite choice enlisted codes."

Yes.

"We have openings for aircraft controller, avionics electronic repair, and radar operator—all very nice codes, the best training the Air Force can offer and we've got the best training in the military. How does that sound, Lion?

"They sound great, sir."

You say you want to go in as soon as possible?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's good. We can get you into a basic training slot in August. And if that's too soon, there's another basic forming up in October."

My heart dropped. "You don't have anything sooner than that?"

"Like how soon?"

"Like next week? Maybe a few weeks from now?"

He laughed at me. "I'm sorry, but the Air Force doesn't work that way." He must have seen my crestfallen look. "Is there something wrong? Is there anything we should be worried about?"

I stammered, already on my feet, shaking his hand. "No, no, no I just figured, you know."

"Uh huh. How important is it for you to get out of town?"

"Very important."

"Hate this weather important or life and death important?"

I remained silent for a moment. I nodded. I'd let him assume what he wanted to assume. Schayes said he understood and shook my hand.

On the way out the door, he coughed and I looked back.

"I normally don't do this kind of thing, it'll kill my quotas, but check with Petty Officer Kolokowski, the Navy guy. You want fast, Kolokowski will get you out of here fast." And just like that, my air force career ended.

I stood outside Kolokowski's office while he sat at his desk, his back to me, speaking on the phone. His door was slightly cracked.

"Yeah, son of a bitch says he's got cold feet. He don't wanna go. Yeah. The kid's fucking my quota up. I gave this kid my best stories, no shit. Yeah, P.I. stories. Smiles. Mojo. Club Caligula and the Cockeyed Cowboy...primo material-lissimo."

Schayes, the tall fair, air force man had given me smooth, polished, blue professionalism. He had offered the best training in the military, but Kolokowski was another animal altogether. He swiveled his chair and saw me waiting.

"I'll call you right back, Jack."

Kolokowski sized me up like a big fat piece of recruit meat. He popped out of his chair energetically. Kolokowski was all of five-four. He had devilish green eyes, large calloused hands, and forearm burnt from the sun and darkened with tattoo ink. This was a sailor.

"You ever been to Tahiti in November?"

"No."

"How about Maui in May?"

"No."

"You know what it's like to have a geisha girl give you a two hour long blow job in a Tokyo dive?"

"Ummm no?"

"Get drunk for fifty cents on a pitcher of Mojo in the P.I?"

Kolokowski still had a grip on my hand. I tried to pull away, instead, Kolokowski brought me closer. His teeth were stained black with tobacco. His breath smelled of coffee and cough syrup. His face was only five inches from my own when he gave me his closer:

"There is one thing that I will never know. And that's what it means to be a black buck on the first day of liberty in Australia. After you make a cruise and pull into Sydney, I want you to find me, Benny Kolokowski, and tell me what heaven is like. Deal?"

I nodded absently, handing Kolokowski my transcripts and ASVAB scores. His demeanor changed from a cold-calling salesman, to that of a man who had been handed a sheaf of papers written in Sanskrit, and surprisingly, understood. He looked them over. "I can get you anything you want with this score."

"How soon?" I asked.

"Four, five months," he offered.

"I need something fast."

Again, his expression changed. Kolokowski understood this kind of currency. Then back again. He wanted to strike a fair deal.

"If you just wait a few months, I can get you the top of the line. Electronic Technician. Sonar Operator. It's the Cadillac of ratings. I mean, if I had these scores—by the way, what's your name?"

"Lion."

"If I had these scores, I would-na been a boatswain mate. I woulda been a contender."

Kolokowski gestured to the badge he wore on his left shoulder.

I tried to be clear with Kolokowski. "I appreciate you trying to be fair, but it's more important that I leave town as fast as possible."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"You don't care what you get?"

"Yeah, I care, but priorities are priorities. How soon can you get me out?"

"I can get you out of here next week if you pass a physical. Fortunately for us, some kid backed out on me. I'll pick you up at five in the morning."

Kolokowski shook my hand, welcoming me to a new world while I was saying goodbye to an old one. Goodbye, Roland. Goodbye, McGriff. Goodbye, Chicken Plantation. Of course, I was happy to be leaving, but I had the strange feeling that in leaving the cold, wet streets of Rivertown, I was making a deal with the devil.

## TWO

### *Subic*

After boot camp, we received a few weeks of shipboard instruction. When one of the AT instructors found out I was headed to a ship called the Mason, he told me I would never learn so fast in all my life. Did I know what boilers were? I told him that my stepfather worked the largest boiler in Rivertown and that I had come from a line of steelworkers. Of course, I didn't tell him that I didn't know the first thing about boilers and every steelworker I knew had been laid off. I didn't need to know a thing about boilers. I was a striker, a non-rate, a free agent in the Navy. I would get no training before being sent out to the fleet. The recruiters told the other non-rates not to worry; they'd



find something in the Navy. "Figure out what you like when you get there," the recruiters boomed with a pat on the back. They didn't tell us that that process could take years. In the meantime, we would be the lowest life forms on the ship. We would immediately be placed in deck department doing the dirtiest work on the ship.

Our instructor leveled with me. "That boiler has killed more than its allotted share of sailors. Godspeed. I checked with the yeoman and he told me that the Mason had been deployed. Lucky Jim!

"So when does it come back?" I asked, hoping that I'd be able to wait it out.

"Oh no," he said. "You'll meet the ship. Probably in P.I., lucky bastard. Here's your ticket. Be at the airport tomorrow by 0800." Why was I lucky. I didn't want to go all the way out there. What if I got lost? What would happen to me?

On the plane, a tall, muscular white guy with a wide chest rambled up the aisle, talking in a thick southern drawl. He called my name as if it were pronounced with a single syllable. "Where's Line? Where Line at?"

"Right here," I said quietly.

"Hot damn," he said. "Me and you's got orders both to the Mason. Scoot on over."

Before meeting Kobb, I had been under the mistaken assumption that people from Florida were northerners basking in the sun. Kobb cleared that up with startling clarity. He had an annoying habit of using "Boy" at the beginning of each sentence. It wasn't a form of address, as much as a form of punctuation.

Boy, this Navy here is gone be popping off something proper. What you think?

Boy, you ever seen a sixteen-foot female gator in your backyard? It'll make you turn tail faster n' a dog licking his own balls.

Boy, I tell you what, Lion, first thing I'm mo do, is get me summa that slant-eyed pussy. I heard they tear cherry boys like us right up, *whuh-we!* What say, Lion? How bout we make ourselves a little pact of friendship. Side by side?

Kobb was so enthusiastic, so garrulous, so unaware of your own sense of exasperation, that I found myself almost liking him. When I went to sleep, Kobb was talking. When I woke up, Kobb was talking. Our plane—a chartered flight full of marines, soldiers, and airman—descended into a Manila air base. It had been a seven-hour flight from Japan, but with Kobb next to me, it felt like fourteen. We exited through the cabin door, but before stepping gingerly down a steep stairwell, I felt a blast of scorching heat rise up from the tarmac and smack me in my chest. The air was so heavy and wet that I felt as if I were breathing through a wet scarf dipped in warm water.

Kobb cried out from the heat. "Goodness, this heat is something else."

The Air Force guys were home, but for us sailors, we had to find a way to Olangapo City. We went inside the terminal where a bureaucratic airman looked down at his clipboard, his forehead barely damp, his aviator sunglasses gleaming. Before Kobb and I opened our mouths, he barely moved his.

"Bus to Olangapo City takes off at 0730 hours."

It was seven p.m. local.

"What we gone do until tomorrow morning?" Kobb asked.

"Do what sailors do," the airman advised. "That, or catch a jeepney." His light blue shirt was completely dry. Sweat already poured from my brow. I could feel my t-shirt soaking through the armpits. My shirt stuck to the side of my ribs.

"What the hell is a jeepney?" Kobb asked.

"It must be some sort of taxi."

"Then why the hell don't they call it a taxi?"

It was too hot to explain to Kobb that people have their own customs and language. Kobb and I crossed the main gate with our seabags slung over our shoulders. We showed the air force gate guard our military ID and then proceeded across a small footbridge, onto a two-lane dirt road. I heard myself breathing hard in the heat. The weight of our seabags began to take its toll. Kobb and I fell into the quiet rhythm of two men struggling with the world on our shoulders.

Kobb looked over. "You all right?"

"Fine." I was losing weight by the minute. Sweat ringed the straps of my seabag.

"Can you believe this?" Kobb asked.

"What?"

"This. A few weeks ago I was living on a houseboat in the swamp. Now I'm on some dirt road going to my first ship."

"That's something."

A scrawny Filipino man walked in our direction. Kobb hailed a man and asked him where we could find a jeepney, but the man simply shook his head and continued walking.

"How about that for hospitality."

"Maybe he didn't understand you."

"The hell he didn't."

We humped some more. An air force truck with empty beds passed us. The airman in the passenger seat laughed. Kobb and I both gave them a sailor's greeting with our middle finger. Though it was almost seven o'clock local, the heat had sapped me of all my strength.

Kobb held his arm out to stop me. I heard the fading echo of gunshots.

"Looke there, Lion."

We had turned a corner in the dirt road. The sun struck my eyes, blinding me momentarily, but when they adjusted, I

too, was startled. I had never seen anything like it on earth. The scene seemed out of a bygone era.

The sun had begun to set over the low green foothills, illuminating the brown tracks that gathered in the town and marched up those humpbacked hills. Beyond, the sea glowed a good blue-green. Strangely I seemed to be looking up at the sea, but it was an optical illusion. We were higher in altitude, but it didn't change the sensation of sitting inside a sea-filled bowl.

Leaning shanties dotted the brown tracks. Lines of ants climbed the tracks-men on mopeds-their sputtering backfires filled the valley. Far away like a distant king, pale blue and majestic in the distance, Mt. Apo melted white into the low clouds.

In the streets, a sort of mad tropical chaos ensued. Thrumming speakers and disco lights poured out from tiny storefront bars. Airman in civilian clothes walked near the storefront bars at their own risk. Small platoons of brown flesh-eating bar girls came out in waves, grabbing and pulling at the airmen. A number of girls felt it necessary to grab genitalia. A red-faced airman took offense. He pushed the bar girl hard on her shoulders. She landed unceremoniously on her backside. Friends/competitors/peers? erupted in a cackling laughter. She hissed back.

A squad of weary airmen laughed at the boot camps. They knew the drill and navigated their way through town in the middle of the street. They sidestepping the potholes, the bright, top-heavy jeepneys, and avoided the agile bar girls who clamored in the margins.

A throng of filthy boys patted airmen on the thighs for blocks at a time, begging, pleading, tears welling up, until the airmen gave in. The choice of giving or not was a poor one. A tall airman, so youthful he might have a few more years left of high school eligibility, gave a boy a few pesos and was immediately assaulted by another throng of smaller, more persistent boys. His friend, a beefy Hispanic

airman, fared no better by not giving. He was surrounded on all sides and put up his arms in surrender.

I waved for a jeepney before the filthy begging boys and the bar girls accosted us. Kobb and I were both in dress white uniforms, ice cream navy boys waiting to get licked. Two jeepneys slowed to look at our uniforms and then sped back up. The drivers shook their head, grim-visaged gold molar creeping through a face gripped by a false smile.

"Let's pull to the side." I told Kobb. We put our sea bags down and waited. Soon a jeepney stopped. A small man got out and walked over to a cobbler. Kobb cornered the little jeepney man, interrupting his conversation with the cobbler. The little jeepney driver shook his head. No gold molars. Kobb continued. Kobb spoke with the passion and seriousness of a composer. Kobb looked back and gestured at me. The little Filipino man disappeared inside the cobbler's store. Kobb smiled as he came back.

"He said he'll take us, but we have to buy shoes from his brother-in-law.

"Let's just give him the money," I said.

"No, he won't allow for that. Man said we have to get fitted, buy them, and then promise to come back and get the shoes."

"Let's tell him what he wants to hear. I don't want to be around here when the sun goes down."

"Me neither."

Kobb nodded his head, agreeing to the terms. He sat in the high, leather-backed chair while the brother-in-law took off Kobb's black leathers and took measurements. Moments later he did the same for me. Kobb picked out an ostrich leather. "My Dad always wanted a pair of Australian ostrich." I thought of Roland and picked out a pair of brown calfskin half-boots. "Goddamn that's soft," Kobb said.

After paying the brother-in-law, we looked around for the jeepney driver.

"Where's your friend?" I asked the cobbler.

"Oh he go home."

"He come back?"

"Oh no. To-mah-oh."

"Then what's that right there?" I said pointing at the jeepney he had just driven.

"Oh, that not taxi, that his cah."

"What?"

"He ain't no driver?"

"No, he bid-nah-men."

Kobb did a slow burn from the cobbler to the car and then to me. "That son of a bitch. You say that's his car?"

"Yes, suh."

"Good. Come on, Lion."

"No."

"You don't even know what I'm gonna do."

"No. We got taken. Now let's chalk it up to experience."

"That man gave us his word. I don't take that lightly. He said he was gonna give us a ride. And he is going to give us a ride, whether he's in the car or not. I'm going to my ship tonight. What are you gonna do?"

We hadn't even gotten to our ship yet and Kobb was already going to make a name for himself, and for me.

"What the hell, let's do it."

"That's my man."

Kobb asked the brother-in-law for a screwdriver and got it. Kobb got inside the car and went under the dashboard for a few moments before the jeepney started with a chortle. I threw the sea bags in back and got in.

"So which way do we go?"

"Go straight and take every left."

"You sure?"

"I have no idea. But we bound to come to something."

"That's the idea."

We took off, two boot camps in search of our ship.

It had been two weeks since we stole the jeepney and we hadn't been on liberty since. Our ship, the Mason, would be there for another week undergoing repairs. Kobb and I feigned ignorance to local custom. Our excuse kept us out of captain's mast, but getting caught stealing a jeepney made Kobb and I liberty risks. Which made no sense at all to me. I mean, once you left the quarterdeck and saluted the ensign, you were at serious risk. The clap line on the main deck spilled out of medical, into the passageway, stopped at the forward passageway hatch, and then double-backed inside the p-way.

Kobb and I made our way past the line every morning on our way to deck division quarters. After quarters, Chief Boyd, our leading chief immediately handed us a scraper, a can of paint, and a brush. "Don't lose 'em or you're paying for them."

Chief hadn't even bothered to introduce himself. "Do you want to know our names, Chief?"

"I already know," Chief replied. "Tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum. Which one are you?"

We worked tropical hours: 0600 to 1000 chow. Some of our shipmates didn't bother with chow. They immediately climbed into their racks and took a nooner. After chow, our shipmates knocked off at 1400 and usually took another nooner before heading back into town. Kobb and I were special. We worked until 1900 every day. By that hour, I was comatose. I barely had the energy to eat chow before crashing into my rack. Kobb was a different matter. He had energy to spare. To expend the excess energy, Kobb sparred with the ship's star boxer, a signalman by the name of Hardison, who was training for the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet smokers. Kobb hoped his volunteerism might lead to some eventual liberty.

One day, after eating chow, I joined Kobb in his ritual of watching sunset from the fantail of the ship. We watched

the rickety fishing boats trawling in Olangapo Bay away off.

"Them shrimpers, Lion. See them lines going aft? They gonna use them to drag these huge nets. They gonna wait until it's dark, and then, in the middle of the darkness, they gonna put out these green lights. Those bring the shrimps to the surface, make those dumb shrimp think it's mating season. That's how they gonna get them shrimps."

Kobb was a vast store of useless knowledge.

Our own ship seemed to be falling apart, as my instructor predicted. They could have a thousand deck hands like Kobb and me, but it wouldn't matter. We looked longingly across the pier to a sleek new Arleigh Burke destroyer. Water lapped gently on her side, just above the water line and her bow extended gracefully out to a razor-sharp line that cut the water clean. No rust on her sides, no sailors with covers at rakish Jack Nicholson angles. The salts on the Mason told us about them boys. Even Rabbi Jackson sneered at the new warriors. Our crew almost never saw their crew at the bars on Magsaysay. Our blue shirts were off, draped over safety lines. Our t-shirt sleeves rolled up past the sweaty shoulders. Though we were both sea-pups, little pollywogs, we were somehow more respected than the Burke crew. We were in the tattoo Navy, dragging on cigarettes, squinting at the world before us, wondering where the best whoring spots were.

Kobb flicked the cigarette butt into a fine arc over our rusty sides. It bobbed like a cork on the waves. Gently, gently. A curious fish investigated the butt, rejected it, then went below. Kobb used the rejection as a cue.

"C'mon Lion. Let's get off this thing and get ourselves one of them menthol jobs. You heard about them yet?"

"Yeah, I heard the guys in the clap line talking about 'em."

Kobb teased. "Cherry boy scared."



"Yeah, cherry boy scared. Look we'll get some liberty sooner or later. They're not going to keep us on the ship the entire time, are they?"

Kobb shook his head. He lit another cigarette.

Through the afternoon haze, the sunset began stroking the sky red, even as it shared the sky with the pale moon.

"Well, see ya, Lion. I'm going to spar ole boy Hardison. Hey, I got an idea. Why don't I say you my second. Then you could at least get off the ship. Go to the gym. It'll be good for you."

"I'll think about, Kobb."

Three days before we got underaway, the exec finally gave us liberty. Kobb and I were up and at em' in five minutes. We took off for Magsaysay Boulevard on Olangapo City, where sin, disco lights, bad architecture, and crude landscaping commingled. We saw the same bar girls, the same crude dirt roads, and the same filthy boys in Olangapo that we had seen in Subic. For some reason, I was struck with sentiment for a place that seemed authentic in its own right. Rabbi Jackson saw the jazz tapes that Roland had sent me and gave me advice on my way off the quarterdeck.

"Try the East Coast. You might like that, Lion."

Inside the East Coast Jazz Club, Kobb and I were on our third pitcher of Mojo. The band—a quintet of small Filipino men in dark sunglasses—played standard fare, some early Miles bebop. "Boplicity", "Jeru", and then a piece from *Porgy and Bess*, but I couldn't remember the name. And then smoothed out on Coltrane's fifteen-minute rendition of *My Favorite Things*, before breaking out with some wild Afro-Cuban stuff. After a few sets, they were brave enough to try a Bauza, but the drummer couldn't maintain the poly-rhythms and in moments, the piece fell apart in happy chaos. I was surprised at how much I remembered from Roland's record collection. During the intermission, I turned my attention to the bar girls.

I liked the bar girls. Bar girls wasn't the correct word for them. They were independent contracting prostitutes. Mama-san was the agent and the bar was her auction house. But the bar girls seemed real. They had a certain amount of latitude in choosing the sailor they'd take home. If they had more power than normal, they could go home alone. When Kobb tried to pay the girls, they declined, and pointed at one of the lithe, effete waiters who strode by now and then to check the level of your drink and to inquire whether or not the hostess is amenable. What they wanted to know was whether you'd like to pay the bar fine? If not, then perhaps move on to another bar.

A beautiful bar girl crossed the waxed parquet floors to a stairwell and reappeared at the second floor landing, leaning against a column. From above, she watched men gather courage, then make the long twisting walk up the stairwell, where she, naturally, sweetly, dismissed them all. Between the drunk vulgar approach of sailors whom she coyly refused, the whore pressed a graceful arm against a curvacious hip, like a studied Hollywood starlet. The beautiful bar girl lifted a glass to her mouth, tossed a bang from her dark eyes, and darted her tongue across her lips. I could imagine Bogart coming on to her, calling her dame this, dame that.

"She wants me," Kobb said, "not even looking."

"She wants no one. It's her job to have you think she wants you."

"You know how I can tell?"

"How's that?"

"When I look, she don't look back."

"But when I yawn, I see her yawn, too. Watch." Kobb yawned. And sure enough, the beautiful bar girl dismissed a sailor with a yawn.

We drank more mojo. The bar girl swung her weight to the other shapely hip.

Unlike other drunk sailors, Kobb approached with sincerity and honest humor, a southern gentleman on the

make. I watched as the whore burst into a beautiful laugh. Kobb made subtle gestures, tipping his hat, bowing slightly, always smiling, a hint of lust in his thin hips and a slight cock of his head. He seemed, oddly enough, to be changing into a darker complexion. A white man with a secret. While scraping rust off the deck fantail, Kobb told me that he had been born the wrong color.

"I should a been a brother. This skin just don't feel right on me. One day I imagine my cracker ass will wake up black as a graveyard fence. You know who I should been?"

I mocked Kobb's lost articles. "Who should you should been?"

"I should been Joe Louis. Joe motherfuckin' Louis."

"You were born white for a reason and that's cause God made you white."

At the mention of God, Kobb turned and focused hard on the beautiful bar girl.

"I want to marry you," he said with sincerity. The bar girl seemed shocked for a moment before quickly regaining her composure. Kobb continued to seduce that beautiful china Jezebel. I watched Kobb and the whore. Everyone watched Kobb and the whore. Good old Kobb, that blonde wedge of a man, slipped three bills in the lining of the waiter's waistcoat. The waiter smiled as Kobb sent him away with a light tap on the rump. The waiter winked a mascara-laden eye. The whore was certainly beautiful. The most beautiful I've seen. So coy, so abbreviated and studied in gesture. Watching her was like watching Elizabeth Taylor in her prime. Sailors bowed before her. The bar girl caressed Kobb's forearm, the sight so dramatic that I felt hairs rise on my own.

Kobb left. The whore followed, her finger inside the hem of his jeans. Kobb winked and smiled. A few drunk sailors applauded as Kobb left. He had a few hours before curfew, plenty of time to take care of business.

I switched from Mojo to San Miguel. It was cheap, only twenty pesos. Nice. Cool.

The band played their last set and I was surprised at the cool Filipino horn man who began to talk with his saxophone, his legs spread wide, his pelvis thrust forward. Through the saxophone I heard him screaming, 'Do you love me? Do you love me?' like the blues albums that Roland listened to on Sundays. That's what the cool Filipino man said up there. I felt a hesitant touch on my shoulder and looked up. Jesus Christ, I said, looking at her. She was the ugliest bar girl I had ever seen, an ambulatory genetic defect searching for a twenty-dollar sailor. Her body was much too small for her lopsided head. Her eyes too close together, exaggerating the effect of the left eye being lower than her right. When she spoke, her mouth was off to the side. She wore a brown sack for a dress, and a gold-braided headband around her head, the kind that LaToya Jackson might wear. I imagine her mother or father made her come down from the mountains to make the family some money, not figuring that ugliness can be a hindrance. She was a small, brown, Filipina Caliban.

"You want company?" she asked. I must have stared too long.

I told her that I was fine, thanks.

"How band? Like Jazz okay?"

"They're fine. Just fine."

"Sit down please?" she asked. I imagined she'd do it anyway.

"Sure, go head."

"You good looking. What's your name, pretty cherry boy you?"

"Lion."

"Line," she said.

Two numbers went by and we didn't talk. The bar girl didn't look up, probably because she was so goddamn ugly. A waiter came by and ignored her. Blades, like God, hate ugly. I kind of felt sorry for her.

"More San Miguel, sir?"

"Two."

"For her?" he said surprised. He was an elegant man.

"Yes, for her."

"Her drink is five dolla," the waiter said. Did you know that, sir? Five dolla."

I give the waiter a crumpled pile of bills and let him sort them out.

"Very good, sir."

The bar girl beamed, blushed because I bought her, the ugliest bar girl in the world, a drink. She gave me her pity party story. It went something like this: unless she made some money this would be her last weekend. Mama-san was going to kick her back to the outskirts where she belonged.

"Mama-san give me two weeks to make money then I am out-ee, like Kerr Gowdy."

"What?" I asked laughing. "What did you just say?"

"Out-ee like Kerr Gowdy," she says. "That what brudders say, no? El Koo-Jay?"

"LL Cool J? The brudders? Oh, you mean the black guys?"

'Oww-dee, oww-dee,' she kept saying again and again, proud of her new burgeoning skills in the English language.

"Who taught you that?" I asked.

She pointed a finger in my chest. "The brudders," she said taken aback. I discussed slang with the ugliest whore I've ever met in my life. Mojo gave me the courage to ask the bar girl her name.

"Kitty. Pet me, okay?" She had been waiting a thousand years to say that line.

I paid her bar fee and we left the East Coast Jazz Club together. She led me by hand to a moped. Wind and dirt swept past. She slid back a sheet of cloth to reveal a little lumpy mattress. I took off my pants and underwear, but I was slack and no matter what we tried, it would not be affirmed.

"I pet, okay?"

"There's no use," I told her. "Don't worry, I'll pay you." I tried to console her but it was no use. Kitty

started crying. I gave her a ten and she stopped. I told her it was time to go back to the East Coast. Kitty nodded and put on her clothes.

Outside, the little kids saw me with Kitty and asked me for money, tugging on my arm with both hands saying, 'Buy some-ting, buy some-ting.'

I flipped them some pesos. They did the same to another sailor, who kicked the little boy. It was Kobb. He was bleeding from the head and smiling.

"What happened to you?"

"Pretty goddamn whore. She done tried to pull one on me. We go to a hotel and we got down the business and afterwards I started to get out a dodge. Ain't no need for me to hang around. Plenty slopes around here for ole Kobb. And she asks me where I'm going and I tell her I'm fitting to bail. Then she showed me her belly, which was flat and smooth 'cept it had a knotty bulge where her pubes start go down. Bitch said she was pregnant. I busted a nut not two minutes before and she say she pregnant."

Kobb leaned against the crooked post, catching his breath. Filthy little boys asked us for change. They patted me on the thigh, looking up with a crooked grin. I prodded Kobb to walk before we were surrounded.

"Buy some-ting. Buy some-ting, brudder." they cried. The smallest in the lot was also the most determined. He continued following Kobb and I as we talked. I tried to ignore him.

"Mike Tyson. Mike Tyson," he called out, grabbing my trouser legs. "Come, Mike Tyson."

No one looked less like Mike Tyson than I, but it didn't matter to the boy. I was a black. I was from America. I was Mike Tyson. The skinny, shirtless boy pressed small packets of flavorless gum in my hands. I flipped a coin at the smallest boy, but he dropped it, causing a flurry of scrambling.

"Then she started asking me what am I gonna do about it. Like it's my responsibility or something. I told her I ain't never seen you before in my life, Bitch trying to burden me. But Lion, it was like she weren't listening or nothing. She just start hitting me and hitting me with her little fists. She said, 'You father. You. You father.' So I'm thinking enough of this mess, Kobb. It's time for me to get the fuck out of dodge. I go beside the bed and start putting my pants on and BAMMM! It feels likes somebody busted a big light bulb in my face and I go down hard. I look up and she has this broken lamp and she's crying like a big baby. 'You okay?' she asked. What you do that for? I asked her. 'Because you the father and you try to leave,' she say. You believe that, Lion? This girl even show me one of those boot camp pictures of this fellow and we're as different as two white boys can be. Then I told her to get out of my way cause I don't intend to hit no lady. But did you see the look on everybody's face when she left with old Kobb? Lord have mercy."

Kobb, not yet a month onboard, was already famous for two reasons. The first reason was of course the misadventures of Kobb and the China Jezebel. The second was a braver reason. Kobb had agreed to replace Hardison in an off-base smoker with the proceeds going an orphanage for the wanted offspring of bar girls and sailors. It was said that the skipper had five hundred on Hardison, but pulled it when Hardison broke his leg after a bad fall from the boat deck while conducting maintenance on the inboard engine. Scuttlebutt had it that the skipper watched Kobb through a workout and put his five hundred back in.

By mid-afternoon the next day, the story had made its way to the skipper. Skipper used the story as a pretense for a pre-fight motivational visit. The skipper told Kobb that that situation reminded him of his second wife after nine months in the North Atlantic.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine sir. No problems at all."

"Good," the skipper told him firmly. He couldn't tell the Kobb he had five hundred riding it. It would have been uncouth.

Kobb was matched against Lance Corporal Childs, a middleweight who was so said to be carved out of solid black stone. Petty Officer Distefano took over Kobb's training. Distefano told us that Childs had been fighting for two years and there was even a rumor that Childs had a tryout with the all-military team for a possible berth in the Olympics. I wondered what Kobb was getting himself into. The night before the fight, we stopped of at East Coast where the girls came by and wished Kobb luck. Two girls sat on Kobb's lap.

"Sure you want to fight this guy?" I asked.

Kobb sat at a chair, his hands gripping the waists of two, tiny bar girls that sat on each thigh. They laughed and cooed at Kobb.

"You butterfly boy. You butterfly boy," the girls repeated while running their fingers through Kobb's blonde hair. If Kobb was a butterfly boy, they didn't seem to mind. We had learned that a butterfly boy is a sailor who hovers and lands on every bar girl available.

The girl sitting on his right thigh—a glazed little panther wearing a black, velvet bikini—leaned in and hid her darting tongue in Kobb's ear.

Kobb shook his head like a wet dog. "Hey, cut that shit out or I'm a tell mama-san." He pretended to finger out the spit and fling it away. Kobb smiled again, then tried to kiss each girl on their tiny breastplate. They giggled like schoolgirls. I looked at their tiny brown bodies, makeup greased over their faces, tiny baby shoes with dramatically high heels. They were schoolgirls who pretended to be sophisticated woman, willing to do anything for you to pay their bar fine, provide them with a steady supply of



products from the exchange, or the motherlode—an allotment made out for a few dollars a month while the sailor was on deployment.

I asked Kobb again about Childs. I was drunk, but I was also concerned. Kobb answered without looking.

"I'm gonna beat that nigger like a runaway slave," Kobb answered without even looking. But even the girls had heard Kobb and stopped laughing. They looked at me, and then back to Kobb. A smile evaporated from Kobb's face.

"I'm sorry—" he had barely gotten it out, before my right had shot out and clipped him on the jaw. Kobb's neck turned rapidly, then spun back, his eyes still pleading with me. Kobb had a good chin or I had no power. I clipped Kobb again, and again, no change in expression. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, God, I'm sorry. I can't help—God I feel terrible. Will you please forgive me? I'm a dumb fucking cracker from Florida. That's why I left. I don't want to be a dumb fucking cracker no more."

I wanted to hit Kobb again, but what would it do. He knew he had done wrong. I could lord it over Kobb or forgive him.

"I'm sorry, Lion. I'm so sorry."

I sat back down. Kobb pushed the girls away. "Get your bony asses on away from here. Shoot. Get us another pitcher of Mojo." Hurt too, the girls scattered, suddenly homeless.

I was still sullen, stung by the remark. But I didn't want to talk. I wanted to drink. Kobb stared at me. A sinner in deep remorse.

"Lion, you are the first bl... you're the first real friend I've had since I joined the Navy. We on the same ship. We shipmates. I only know you for a few days, but you already feel like a brother to me. My daddy and the rest of my brothers and sisters, they do the same thing every damn day of their lives. Don't nothing change with them. They work at the factory, they go fishing, they drink, they go to

the state football games, but they ain't never been to college. With all the money they spend on beer, fishing, and football, we could have all gone to college. You just don't know is all I'm saying. I'm here because I want to do better. I want to see what this big ole world is all about. I want to meet people from different places. I want to take chances. And you know what, they hate me for that. They didn't want me boxing in the golden gloves. Told me only niggers boxed. So I stopped boxing to please him, and then I felt like a loser. One day, I just walked into the recruiter's office. I picked the first one. Sat down at his desk and told him where do I sign?

"My daddy found out what I was doing and you know what he said? He said 'What's out there that we ain't got right here in Florida?' You believe that? He told me that the family needs me? For what? Another drinking partner? Hell, fuck-all they need me. I'm gone see the world. Drink a mojo with my shipmate. Screw me some slope puntang, and win a thousand dollars. Now do you forgive me?"

"Of course," I said. I lit a cigarette that I found in my shirt pocket and began smoking it. I had never smoked a cigarette in my entire life. "Now what about Childs?" I asked once more.

"You're talking to old Kobb here," he said. "I'm your bud, I'm your pal. Have a little faith in me. Get in my corner. And let me have a cigarette," he added.

I blew smoke in Kobb's face. "I don't smoke," I said nonchalantly while a cigarette dangled from the corner of my mouth. Kobb laughed uproariously and fell on the damp, mojo-stained floor, holding his sides. It took all my effort to get him back to the ship before curfew. After all, it was the night before his fight.

Kobb still looked good the next day. In the ring, he loosened his neck muscles with odd-looking exercises. He

looked like a bird straining its neck while searching for prey. Fit, trim, and tallish, Kobb had long, thin arms, and a wide, muscular back. Kobb's weight had been 154lbs that morning. Childs, though a pound or two lighter, looked huge compared to Kobb. A large contingent of marines had paid five dollars to see their boy.

The bell rang and Kobb swarmed all over him with combinations. He was working Childs all over the ring; Kobb dinged Childs' muscled head with a jab again and again. Childs would come with a big right and Kobb, with the sweet science all in him, would sidestep, and show Childs all kinds of angles, countering with a set of crisp combinations that beat the sweat off Childs big head. Childs shook his head in fury. He hadn't expected a white boy with skills. This white boy was popping jabs in his face at will, like it wasn't nothing. Just automatic. Whenever Childs would start to act up, Kobb would just put a left in Childs face. Pop Pop Pop. Kobb was upside Childs' head. I felt alive all of sudden and started cheering Kobb on like crazy. A fuzzy warmth rode through me at the sight of blood trickling from Childs' nose.

Near the end of the first round, Kobb was tired from all that jabbing and running around Childs hooks. Kobb threw a weak jab then a right cross that brushed Childs' jaw. Kobb's right didn't get back in time and Kobb got nailed with a crunching rib shot. I could have sworn I heard Kobb's ribs crack in two. He went down in a heap, then Childs rabbit-punched Kobb on the deck as he knelt on one knee. The marines were going crazy, slapping and punching each other.

One, two, three, four, the referee counted. At five, Kobb was on his feet. While the referee held Kobb's gloves and you could see fire in Childs' eyes. But before Childs could try to take Kobb's head off, the bell rang. I went to Kobb's corner and everyone was huddled around his squatting figure. The corner men were slapping grease on his face,

squirting streams of water in his mouth, and talking over each other.

When he shows you the big right, sidestep, then hook. He's big, but that got nothing to do with his chin

His corner men turned around and gave me funny looks, but quickly got back to working on Kobb. He turned his head and smiled faintly, the mouthpiece about to fall from his wet lips. He was beautiful, even now. I gave Kobb the thumbs up. The bell rang again and before Kobb had his mouthpiece all the way in, Childs was throwing bombs to Kobb's ribs. It was a footrace now. Kobb was trying hard to avoid those big bombs while Childs tried just as hard to drop them.

Kobb stayed still long enough to cut Childs' eye with a stiff cross, but tripped over his feet trying to get out of the way of one of those bombs and fell face first against the ropes— defenseless. Childs was right there on top of him and bounced him off the ropes with a terrible sock to the head. There was this sick smile on Kobb's face, as Childs measured and blasted, measured and blasted, rocking Kobb back and fro like a drunken rag doll. I looked for the referee, but he was paralyzed by the spectacle, frozen to the matting. Kobb was stuck in the ropes, getting his head pounded again and again. His arms akimbo and legs splayed out on the canvas. Kobb smiled, even as Childs landed hammer blows to his head. Finally, his corner men threw in the towel and led Kobb back to his chair. A crowd engulfed him, everyone asking if he was alright. Kobb gave the thumbs up. Marines were going crazy yelling and slapping each other's bald heads. Childs began walking over to Kobb's corner. Suddenly I heard it. Some sick fuck had picked up the ring gavel and rung the bell. Kobb reacted, flying out of his chair punching, and collapsed on ring floor at Childs' feet. The thin smile on his face stiffened and his blue eyes went gray.

# Three

## *Smokers*

I don't know why, but after Kobb got hurt, I found myself volunteering to fight in the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet smokers. Hardison was so broke up that he barely came out of the boat shop. He never came to my fights. So this was what it felt like to fight? Vicking blades didn't count and fights back in Rivertown didn't count—those ended in seconds. Boxing is another thing entirely. Turned out, I was a natural middleweight. I was young. I had legs. What I lacked in skill I made up for in long arms and speed. Speed kills, Blinky kept telling me as I sparred. *Angles, angles, speed. Angles, angles, speed. Work, work, work. Don't load up, flow. You and he's is partners.* He talked to me while I trained:

"If you work this Lion, good deals can be had, and that's what we sailors live for. Good deals. At the end of every offer, you gotta ask yourself 'Is this a good deal?' Chan was quick to endorse Blinky's idea, only because there could be big money in it for Chan. In addition to his many shipboard hustles, Chan ran the gambling ring on the boat and there was money to be made. Blinky ignored Chan and repeated that he had always wanted to train a fighter. Blinky had been a promising Brooklyn welter, fighting against other boroughs in the PAL. After he was beaten four straight times as an amateur, he joined the Navy. "I could see my skills terry-ate by the week," Blinky said as he smoked his cigarette.

We pulled back into Olangapo a few more times before heading to the Gulf. In Olangapo, Blinky made me jog six miles after the workday ended, then I had three hours of training in the base gym, or, if either of us had duty, in the weapons magazine. Once, in the middle of my daily run, I was caught in violent sheets of rain, and forced to take refuge amongst the bar girls, but I was too Cherry Boy to do anything about it. Too fearful of venereal diseases to pay the bar fines. And too fearful that Blink would find out that I was drinking mojo and paying bar fines at the East Coast Jazz Club.

In the ring—alive with snap, fury, and fear—I wore the rotting and bulbous headgear as sweat poured down my head. I looked like a child slugging it out with sixteen-ounce gloves. Being hit was like awakening from a childhood slumber to the smell of rotten leather. Despite the clutches of hurricane fans, unbearable heat from inside an airless, open hangar peeled away layers of my will. At the end of that first round, I heaved like a drowning man. My lungs seared, ready to burst. The Marine's head was hard as a flat iron skillet. I tried to bang with him and it was a mistake. Blinky roared at me from the corner. He was disgusted. He chopped me down like sapling. As I fought, a lone sailor

leaned on the ring curtain, watching the fight while slinging a transparent blue yo-yo. Even from the peripheral, the up and down motion transfixed me.

The Marine, Corporal Harris Gorbock, a southpaw hooker from Wichita, hacked at my body in workmanlike fashion. He got closer and closer to my chin. I resigned myself to the likelihood that he would knock me out and wash my sins away. That goddamn heat killed me. I wanted to sit down. I launched an desperate arcing right, and the long arcing right took too long to come back home, and just like that, a blaze of bright crimson and gold darkened over my face and suddenly, I was down on one knee, gasping for air. He should have hit me harder.

I had been trying to hold the Corporal at bay with jelly jabs, but it was like holding onto the cutting end of a buzz saw. I got up and fought on. Thirty seconds later, Gorbock ducked under my lazy right cross and hit me with a clean left hook that landed flush against my temple. I went flat on my back and began to think about the smallness of the world, of my ship, of the ring. I was a long way from Rivertown, Pennsylvania. A long way from my mother's aspirations. Far far from Roland and the blades. Omar and Pelham. Turk and Shelly and Scaife. I wondered if they knew that at that very moment, I was flat on my back, having been knocked out by tough white kid from Wichita. Everything seemed to take so long. In my corner, Petty Officer Roy Chan the Money-Man, implored me to get up, even as he videotaped the beating. He had twelve hundred dollars riding on me to take one out of three rounds and I was taking a thorough beating. In fact, I was being blown out. I popped up on my feet, but my trainer, Blinky gestured for me to stay down on the knee. Get my rest. Chan, knowing very little about boxing, stared contemptuously at Blinky. Blink held up six fingers, instructions for me to stay down until six, clear my head, and get my sense of destruction back. Yeah. I

wondered how I'd gotten there, almost knocked out by a grinning Marine.

In the ring, it seemed as if the referee missed three and four. Actually, I had missed three and four. I clearly heard five and got up at six. The referee looked into my eyes as he held my gloves. Corporal Gorbock was no longer grinning; he stared with cold, dead eyes. I turned back towards the ref and tried to focus on his pale blue eyes, while bouncing confidently on the balls of my feet as if it were a flash knockdown. It wasn't. I couldn't remember ever being hit so clean. I was only trying to convince the sparse crowd I was ready to fight, not the referee. Fight, the referee said. My heart dropped. I was briefly disappointed that he hadn't stopped the fight.

The tournament had been a breeze before the Corporal caught me. My previous three fights had been against sailors who hadn't bothered to train. They had thrown haymakers and tried bullying me around the ring for the first minute. I just ran track until they got tired, then I picked my punches. Not the Corporal. He came in with a plan and knew exactly what to do once he stepped in the ring. I clinched him and held on for life, still trying to clear the fog. He broke the clinch and chopped me in the back of my head. That, and those goddamn elbows of his kept flying at my eyes. The elbows and rabbit punches were illegal if the referee caught them, but he caught nothing. The Corporal hurt me big time, keeping me in a fog. Finally, the referee called time and issued Gorbock a warning.

I was still hurt from the first blow, as if I were struggling to wake from a bad dream or a restless nap. I couldn't put the world on straight. A vision quickly passed: I saw myself as a toddler playing in a small, inflatable pool while my grandmother (who never gave me haircut money) watched over me in the same sunflower smock she wore everyday of her grandmotherly life. My grandmother fanned



herself and looked at me and said something, but I couldn't hear.

"Fight," the referee said before the image fall away. Gorbock feinted and I half-ducked right into the Corporal's left hook that landed square on my temple. I didn't fall. I just kind of stood there on queer street, easing down in hopes that he wouldn't hit me again as I took another knee. The referee leaned down and counted with hot, aggressive fingers. His mouth opened and closed, spittle clinging relentlessly to the corners. I stared at him in quiet contemplation. Then the thought occurred to me. I should get up now.

I got up and the referee tapped my gloves and looked me in the eyes again. He looked for that unfocused glassiness which I probably had, so I began snapping my head shoulder to shoulder to shake the funk and ensure he couldn't get a look at my eyes. Later, Distefano said that I was learning the fight game even as it was being played.

"Sometimes you have to go in like three card monte," he later said, whatever that meant. The referee said fight and I tried to bum-rush the Corporal, but I was swinging wildly and he caught me with a straight right hand as I leaned in. I don't remember crumpling to the deck, nor the makeshift ring floor rising to hit me, nor smiling guilelessly at my corner, but Chan and Blinky showed me the video the next day.

"He's kicking your ass all over the ring and look there, you fucking smiling. You got nerve, Lion. I shoulda hooked you. How many touches was that Chan, you math fucking major? Three, four knockdowns. The fucking ref should have stopped it."

On the video, I popped right up and yet, I remember none of it. I must have been out on my feet. I don't remember my head hurting at all. In fact, my head and body felt dreamy and pleasurable. I saw myself smile in the video. Gorbock gave me an odd look. All the mildly terrible

things I would go on to do for Chan and myself disappeared in that thunderous storm that had washed my sins and left me without electricity. I felt cleansed and recharged. The bell rang and I went back to my corner. I had gone beyond hurt, towards a dream world where there is only happiness and good will. Blinky knew I was hurt. He had a towel in his hand.

"Why didn't you use it?" I asked as we watched my own fight.

"Here's where I give you the big speech." On video, Blinky talked at length, but I only remember one phrase: Just go out there and hit that son of a bitch. Let them goddamn hands go."

On video, Blinky used the towel to wipe me off.

In the fight, I had looked across the ring and saw the Corporal smiling with his seconds. His trainer, cut man, and seconds were all Marines as well, and they looked at me as they gave Gorbock advice.

"Look at that self-satisfied son of a bitch. Just yucking it up," Distefano said. "They think this a day at the ballpark, Lion. They having a fine time at your expense." I caught the Corporal's eye and he didn't stop smiling. He winked just as the bell rung. Son of a bitch.

Gorbock was short and powerful, flat-chested, iron-headed, and thick limbed; he was born to be a Marine. His head was completely shaved save for the short tuft of hair that I could see through his red and gold headgear. He had been dominating me in the ring for those first two rounds, bulling me around, measuring and blasting my ribs until I would cover up my midsection, and then he would begin socking me on the head. His fighting style was conventional, but effective against a rank amateur like myself. He set me up, and made my snot fly when he finished combinations with hooks that came like sharp axes.

But after Gorbock knocked me down that third time, something had changed. I went down a scared fighter, and strangely enough, I got up a different man.

"Sometimes, it happens like that." Blinky theorized.

He came out the next round smiling. He should have cornered me against the ropes, then measured and rocked me into sleep. Perhaps he should have picked me, coasting on two out of three until the round was over. Instead, the Corporal decided that he was gonna knock me out and oddly, my body and mind took issue with his intentions. The world clarified and slowed down such that I knew immediately where I belonged in that ring. I imagined I was a youth again, fighting for fun in the schoolyard as other boys joked that my biological father wasn't no fighter pilot. Nigga was in jail. I calmly walked across the ring as if to thank Gorbock or, at the very least, light his cigarette, but we tapped gloves and I remembered what I was there to do. In the first few seconds, I felt as if we were dancing and we had switched the lead. I sat down on my heels and took the center of the ring. My reach was longer, longer even as I snapped the jab. I lead the Corporal by a close millisecond. I finished combinations and countered hooks before he got them off. I beat him to the jab and cornered him. When he went for a feint, I caught him awkwardly and he sort of tripped over his feet and fell to the canvas.

The Corporal recovered quickly and nodded to the ref, then resumed his plodding, hooking style, a style that I had just solved. It was a tactical mistake on the Corporal's part. I leaned back on my heels and took the center of the ring. His corner shouted as much. I quickly found my distance and snapped his jarhead back with piston-like jabs, punctuated with hard straight rights that, to Blinky's delight, were suddenly in vicious working order. Now desperate, the Corporal changed his style and began to lead with dangerous-looking left hooks, the way Tyson does when he's out of shape, but I saw them before he threw and leaned away easily. For every lead hook, the Corporal caught two jabs and a right. He began heaving and covering up. I watered his eyes. A mixture of tears, snot and blood ran

down his nose and mouth. He clinched me and caught me with a head butt to my nose, which hurt me, but only for a moment. It didn't matter. Blinky stopped the bleeding during the referee's timeout. He said nothing to me during that exchange. Fight.

I took the center of the ring and stood an inch outside of the corporal's range and began to pick dispassionately at the buffet, landing solidly, taking away his choices and his will, piece by piece. The recent turn of events began to amuse me, that is, until he clocked me on the side of the head. And then I became cold. I found myself searching for the improbable knockout. He pawed feebly to keep me away, but I countered until he was sick of getting countered and he no longer pawed at all.

He covered up and without thinking I stepped inside his reach and drove a left uppercut between his cover, straight into his chin and he leaned back against the ropes. His body was caught between the first and second rope, as his eyes lolled freely inside his skull. I knew he could not defend himself, but no one else knew. He began sliding very slowly down the ropes. I paused, waiting for the referee to give the Corporal the eight count, but it was too late. Instinct took over and before the referee could intervene, I did my best to separate his bobbing jarhead from his neck with a roundhouse right. He should have knocked me out when he had the chance. I was surprised and apologetic even as the blow arced towards his chin. His head snapped to the left, at nearly a ninety-degree angle to his torso. His head bobbed around. I felt sick. But the referee remained frozen in place and so I was ready to hit him again. The Corporal's eyes were now slits and although he was breathing shallowly, he had no control over the spasms that pulsed through his legs. Finally, his seconds threw in the towel, much too late mind you, and they began screaming at me that we are all on the same team.

The referee thawed. He waved his hands frantically and held the Corporal in his fleshy arms. "Keep that mouthpiece in," Blinky advised. I turned to Blinky (that sweet Brooklyn grin) as he shook his head. His gesture was of amazement, not disbelief. He took me into his arms and lifted me up. The Corporal came about a few minutes later, and the first thing he asked was, "Did I knock him out?"

At the East Coast that night, Blinky gave me fistic history lessons while Chan brought two beers and a club soda. I sipped the club soda, spat it out, then grabbed Chan's beer. My manners had gone to shit after I had joined the Navy, there was no doubt about it. My mother wouldn't even recognize me. I couldn't go a sentence without saying fuckface, shitbird, dickless, cocksucker, goddamn, or sorry bastard. There were more, but it's just too embarrassing. Blinky went over the fight moment by moment and told me in no uncertain terms that my first two rounds were disastrous. He had been ready to throw in the towel twice. What prevented him from doing so was, well he didn't know himself. "I just felt that it would turn out all right. I had this stupid Italian faith in you, I guess." Blinky got a little sentimental, and then he got all parental on my ass. I couldn't expect to win if that kind of performance continued, he said. Performance? He was taking this smokers a little too seriously, I told him. I could care less, and maybe that was why I was in the championship. Something set in me when he told me I looked like I didn't give a flying fuck. I wanted to tell Blinky that it wasn't about him, it was only about not giving a flying fuck. A lousy listener, Blinky went on and on, first about the fight, then back to fistic history. Benny Paret, Dick Tiger, and Sonny Liston, Sugar Ray Robinson and Billy Conn, Jack Johnson and Alexis Arguello.

While Blinky talked, Chan and I looked around for any new bar girls. I had only been on the ship for a few months, but I had already been seen what a sailor would do for a

piece. Eight to eighty, dead less than a week, they'd say as they looked in the mirror to tie their neckerchief right before a port visit. I've seen guys blow a paycheck on a bar girl, and then give her an allotment to tie her over until the sailor pulls back into port. Then they'd be broke and the wifey back in Des Moines needed money to pay the bills, and that's when Chan Chan the Money Man came in.

The minimum loan was four yards, which would cost you one yard, due the following payday. An even five hundred. The cost would jump another yard if you were extended to the following payday. After the third payday without payments on interest, Chan would give me a list of delinquents. And the nice thing about living aboard a five hundred and eighty six foot ship was that you didn't have to search very long. It usually didn't get physical, but when it did, I preferred my hands. When it came to being economical, the 2 and 1/2 inch firemain nozzles, the long venturis, and various pieces of handy DC equipment were my first choice. They were vicious, useful, and ubiquitous.

I also learned on the job. When I accidentally dislocated a corpsmen's jaw, he taught me how to put it back in place on the other side. It was extraordinarily painful, yet left no physical scars, but it put the fear of God in derelicts. If the derelict was a smoker, I followed him out to the smoke break area at night and we talked about how long a sailor could survive in the ocean. Then I would dangle them over the lifeline, the salt spray foaming their hair. I kept 25 percent of the total collected, and there never seemed to be very many hard feelings.

"Am I boring you?" Blinky asked. Half to death, I told him. Chan slid me half of his twelve hundred dollar take. I couldn't recall all the slaps on the back, the grins and the clenched fists from shipmates, even from guys I had run-ins with. All I could think of was my new state of mind. The perfect sense of freedom, because you just don't give a flying fuck. Or something like that. Right then and there, I

loved being a sailor. We were a bunch of horny bastards ready to do anything.

A table of drunk chiefs looked hungrily at an ageless mama san. The chiefs were the worst. Most of their wives had been obese since they were second classes and they were just getting by on the ROAD program. Retired on active duty, and they weren't worth the cost of the chow they gorged on. My own chief patted the old bartender on the ass. He looked at me and winked as if he were some kind of player. What a sorry son of bitch. I'd probably be just like him in fifteen years if I kept this up.

At quarters the next morning, the CO came over the 1MC. Word came down that every sailor not on duty could get early liberty if they were attending the championship smokers. Not at the base gym, but on the carrier. A few shipmates in my division said fucking ay and slapped me on the back. They were wondering why I've been showing up at quarters with bruises and black eyes. After we were posted, my division officer pulled me aside and escorted me to the CO's at sea cabin. The captain sat at his small aluminum desk, ignoring Ensign Garibaldi and I as he poured over logs. The captain of the ship, Commander Earl J. Ferris, was once a country boy and fighting at Annapolis had somehow transformed him. I overheard the officers say that his bird was already in hand. I had also overheard that he was impressed with my comeback against the Marine. He had also won a bottle of scotch and Cuban cigars from a Light Colonel, one of his old classmates.

"Wait outside", Ferris said. Garibaldi looked at me and nodded towards the hatch.

"No", the CO said. "I want you out." Garibaldi looked like a child whose bike had just been stolen. I stood at attention until the CO told me to stand at ease. The CO was a short man and the crew adored him. He argued with the Commodore damn near every day, and seemed to have an anti-authoritarian streak as wide as the Pacific. He was a daring

shipdriver during division tactics, had chased Akula-class submarines in the North Sea, and had seen action off the coast of Beirut. He even had shrapnel in his back from Israeli friendly fire. The Captain relished a reputation of an irreverent swashbuckler, a twentieth century Stephen Decatur. Ferris was known to wrestle his favorite officers in the passageways. (Garibaldi never wrestled with the skipper.) Ferris hit golf balls off the fantail, and liked to swagger down the brow after a night out on the town. He also had his own firearm, which he used to shoot Coca-Cola bottles off the bridge wing. It was very difficult to throw bottles off the wing then shoot them,, so the CO instructed the Senior Watch Officer to have the JORG, junior officer requiring guidance, conduct this hazardous duty. When my division officer drew this duty, it was said the CO fired him because he threw like a girl.

The CO walked the passageways like a man of action and we popped to attention as he entered a compartment. He pretended to be annoyed by military courtesy, but he positively thrived being the captain of a warship. The CO signed the last log and got up to leave.

"Follow me", he said. We left his cabin. Outside, Garibaldi popped to attention and tried to follow.

"You just sit your five dollar ass right there," he said, telling Garibaldi to stay put.

The CO put on sunglasses and sat in the captain's chair on the bridge wing. He faced forward and perhaps it was the breeze that made him smile and he looked out on the ocean in contentment. Here was a man who had found his life's purpose. The sea was a mirror and our bow parted the translucent blue calm without strain.

"That was a damn good fight, Lion. Showed some heart. And you finished like a shark. I feel sorry for that jarhead son of a bitch, but they don't say protect yourself at all times for nothing."

"Thank you sir."



"Heart and hard work will beat out talent nine a half out of ten."

"Yes sir."

"You learn to crack like that in the hood?" *Hood?* I guess that's where all black people who join the Navy must come from. I hesitated before speaking.

"No sir", I said. "Petty Officer Blinky has been teaching me, sir."

"I used to hit middleweight at Annapolis until this youngster cracked me so hard, I had a fucking headache for two weeks. I found out that this guy was the Illinois amateur runner up. He didn't look like much, but damn he could crack." The captain got off the chair and assumed a fighting stance.

"Let's see your stance", he ordered. So I got in my stance. "Now let's see your one-two." And I showed him my one-two.

"Again", he ordered. And I did it again. The captain abandoned his stance to study my own. He gently adjusted the tuck of my arm, the tilt of my head, and angle of my knee. The captain told me I would be fighting a stone cold mother named Childs for the championship.

"You were there when he fought Kobb, God bless him. That doesn't have to happen to you. It won't happen to you. Childs is great, but he's never been tested. You never know what a man is like until he fights tired. That's when you know who's got it and who doesn't. And I can see that you clearly have it? Now about that little jeepney incident you had when you first got here—we're going to take that off the books. How's that sound?"

"Great sir, sir."

"Good. Now about Childs. If you can take his punch once, get over that fear of being hit, if you crowd him, if you let him know that you're not scared." He went on. The captain practically ordered me to discard the most natural feeling in the world, fear.

"Step inside his hook, that's his punch. If you want to win, Lion, you're gonna have to take a punch. He knocks people out with the hook. Do what you gotta do, but don't let him get off the hook. It's murder. Get inside and slip, and you might have yourself a shot." Then he leaned in close and whispered. "I saw you slip against the Corporal. You part Mexican or something?"

I didn't remember slipping much against the Corporal, but then again I didn't have to. I didn't even know any Mexicans before I joined the Navy.

"No, sir."

"Hmmm. Okay, follow me."

When we returned to his cabin, I noticed that my service record was open, face down on his desk. And then he asked me if I had ever thought about going back to college because he saw right away that I had good aptitude, good potential. I said yes, I had.

"Since when," he asked?

"Since I joined the Navy," I lied. I told him that I saw my potential only after joining up. That's what Ferris wanted to hear and that was the impression I left. The CO told me to keep my nose clean for a few more months and he would see what he could do.

I had never wanted anything, except to leave Rivertown. My mother wanted me take after my biological father. Look where it got him? He had made it out of the steel mill town on the Monongahela and now he was dead because he was a half-assed swimmer. I only knew what I didn't want. I didn't want to be my father. He was this and that and that and this. I've heard it all my life, and now I was sick and tired of it. When my division officer and I left, he smiled at me and laughed.

"Just like that?" Garibaldi asked, his voice seething with resentment. Garibaldi was not like the others. He was from West Texas, but he wasn't a farm boy. The officer thing wasn't in him, even I could tell. The harder he tried, the

worse it got. I'd seen him many times, on the quarterdeck, in khakis in polo shirt, waiting for another officer to walk by for him to buddy up with. Garibaldi was calculating. The other officers didn't notice me as I cleaned and they laughed at Garibaldi because his name was Garibaldi and he was an OCS guy, not a bad guy, but lacking natural camaraderie. "Every time I turn around, there he is, smiling like it's the most natural thing in the world," one of the officers mentioned.

In the days before the championship fight, the crew treated me as if I were some kind of thoroughbred horse. I ate the choicest of wardroom food. I was kept off the watchbill. The corpsman gave me a rubdown after my workout. The day of the fight, Commander Ferris gave me the Gipper speech. The duty driver took Chan, Blinky, and I to the aircraft carrier. The smoker's would be held in the hanger bay. A few shipmates spotted me from the aircraft elevator and instantly let out a rebel yell, being that our ship was named after a dead confederate sloop commander. There were eight fights that day and mine would be fifth. I watched the first fights, a wild featherweight affair between a Korean and a Mexican, and then went back aft into the Jet shop, which served as a fighter's dressing room. Where was Childs? I looked around for an opponent about my size, but there were none. I put on the crouch protection. Then I put on the boots. I sat down on a trainer's table while Blinky wrapped my hands with wrap he had ordered from his old Brooklyn gym. The wrap had arrived in mail call two days earlier, and I've never seen Blinky as happy. He couldn't shut up about that goddamn hand wrap, like it was woven from golden flax. But when Blinky put it on, it felt like silk inside my palm. When he was done the right felt too tight and I told him so. Blinky made me punch a few times. They were still too tight. He rewrapped the gloves a second time as patiently as he had done the first and that's why I loved that Brooklyn bastard. I heard the hatch open noisily; it needed maintenance. Chan

walked through the hatch and said that the action was hot out there and that he had already made five hundred on the Korean and another three hundred on a Puerto Rican welterweight from the USS Stalwart.

"That right, Roy?" Blinky said. He used his wise voice. Blinky didn't even look up. He didn't like that kind of talk around a fighter, even a rank amateur such as myself. Blinky was something of a purist even if he knew that Chan and I only cared about the money. I could tell that much as Blinky liked Chan, he didn't want Chan around the dressing room. Maybe after the fight: not before. Chan didn't understand subtlety, or purity of purpose. He understood balances, odds, and the relative worth of favors. Chan had an undeniable gift for making money. He had a year's worth of uncashed checks in his coffin locker and working for Chan kept the money coming in for me. Chan's services were vast. Don't want to get popped on a urinalysis sweep? Talk to Al Chan. (That was the only time he did business with Bruce, the Master-at-Arms.) Need a weekend off duty to spend time with that sweet Thai honeydip you met in Singapore? Talk to Al Chan and bring a yard. Want in on the monthly poker game in the chief's mess? Need an extra two hundred on that travel claim? Need to borrow a grand because you got set back in the monthly poker game in the chief's mess? Want fresh sheets, fresh laundry, and a four oh rack with hospital corners? Guess what? Talk to Al Chan and don't get fresh because prices might go up.

If the girlie magazines weren't cutting it and you wanted a menthol blowjob from a benny-boy then you'd have to arrange it with Bruce, the Master-at-Arms. Chan wasn't in the pimping business. Chan could make money, but he wasn't the most charismatic guy in the world, and he had a little honor.

Chan tapped me and I realized that I had been napping. Blinky was done with the tape job. I felt cold so I jumped rope for five minutes and got a good sweat. A burly Master

Chief with a thick peppery mustache and tattooed arms cracked the hatch open. He pointed right at me.

"Showtime baby boy," he said. As we were about to leave the Jet shop, a baldheaded, bow-legged sailor slid up next to us. I read his nametape. Crews, typed in block letters.

"Action?" Crews asked.

"Who you?" Blinky asked.

Crews looked Blinky up and down. "Talking money here Rocky-boy. Interested?"

"Get your eggplant ass outta here." Blinky said, giving him the bum's rush. Crews acted like he hadn't even heard Blinky.

Chan and I looked at each other.

"Y'all look like money. It's hot out there," Crews added, as he pulled out a thick wad of hundreds. Blinky told Crews to get the fuck out of our fucking faces. I wondered if Blinky would have called him a nigger if I weren't there.

"Who's your money on?" I asked Chan. It was a joke we would play. A reaffirmation of having each other's back. (Who's your money on? It's on you my man.)

"My money on you, my man," Chan said instinctively, but I was left wondering if he meant it. He didn't know Childs, so he didn't know the odds. And Chan never liked leaving things to chance.

"Odds?" I asked.

"Six to one," Crews said. He didn't have to tell me I was a long shot. Chan's eye's lit up. There was money to be made if I got lucky, even if Childs was the reigning 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet champ, even he hadn't gone three rounds with an opponent since he joined the Navy. I didn't care. You can't beat six to one. We had just gotten paid and I knew that Chan had over a thousand dollars on him. I told him to go one thousand on me. Chan gave Crews the money. Crews took the grand and snickered as he turned to leave, but I turned him with my glove.

"Where you pay off?" I asked seriously. Crews continued snickering as he counted the money.

"You best worry about getting knocked out by my boy, stead of worrying about pay off," Crews said as he opened the hatch to leave.

Chan had this quizzical look on his face. "My man. Hold up." Chan followed Crews outside.

"What the fuck, Chan," Blinky said. Chan shrugged his shoulders. I had seen Chan gesture like that when guys asked for more time to pay off loans. It meant that he could do more, that business was business.

Blinky and I walked forward to Bay Two. Thousands of sailors milled about. I noticed gawking and excitement on the port side, where a boxer was receiving medical attention. A purple-shirted airedale spit in my ear. "You next. Childs gone knock you the fuck out." That name again. Blinky pushed the airedale away. A large section on the port side of Bay Two was reserved for high-ranking officers. I saw my CO and many of the junior officers from the wardroom standing near his seat. The captain winked at me and gave me the thumbs up. He tapped the admiral who sat next to him and the admiral looked at me and smiled. Jesus Christ.

When I got into the ring, the beads of sweat that once glistened on my forehead had evaporated and I was as cold as frostbitten metal. Then I heard a shrill ringing and the movement of gears and machinery. Elevator Two shifted and began to lower. Four thousand men turned starboard and watched as the elevator lowered at ten feet per second. The officers stood up in their seats. The elevator was halfway down before we realized that a man was standing on deck in the center. It was Childs, alone and ready for combat, standing with his gloves on his hips. He stood like that until the elevator had completely lowered. Childs was stationed on the carrier and as soon as the crowd saw that it was one of their own, they roared with approval. From a distance, Childs looked like two hundred pounds of muscle,

though I knew he weighed in at no more than one hundred and sixty-seven. He was as dark and cold as space, gleaming with petroleum jelly, his muscles rippling from below his trunks and rising winglike into his lats and rippling outward forming his long, lean arms. I knew that incredible physiques do not necessarily imply incredible skills, but from a distance Childs was a beautifully sculpted, intimidating giant. I would soon find out that he had skills to match.

While Childs made his way to the ring, sailors reached out to touch him. Childs ignored them. He looked straight ahead. Childs slipped between the ropes easily without a man holding them taut. He walked the squared circle and seemed to stare at every man in the hanger bay. He stared like he could kick the shit out of every man in that hanger bay. He didn't raise a glove or pose in the slightest. He intimidated them all and they seemed to turn away from the heat, towards me. I felt every man's pity; my destruction was inevitable. The roar did not subside until the bellman rang impatiently and a microphone was lowered to the ring by a sailor operating a cherry picker. Chan and Blinky were in my corner. I turned to my left and saw a clutch of my shipmates: Ayo, Krowblewski, and Sessoms. I turned to my right and saw Chan's rival, Bruce, the Master-at Arms, surrounded by a gang of his sea bitches. He saw me looking and shook his head in pity.

The bell rang, igniting the blood lust of four thousand sailors, and I felt their desire for blood. They wanted a show. They were sailors after all. They wanted the separation of a body and a mind from each other. I saw my CO stand and clap for me, stone-faced, as he motioned for me to walk through Child's right. Then I saw Childs across the ring staring at me with purely focused dispassion. He snapped his head back and forth shoulder to shoulder, at an extraordinary speed. My heart dropped. I lost my nerve that

very instant and looked down at my feet in despair. What in God's name had I gotten myself into?

What is there to do in a fight, but hit and be hit? I had gotten into so many fights as a child that it should have been part of an after school program. My mother had made the mistake of taking me out of a perfectly good private school to a neighborhood public school so that I might become more culturally assimilated. My sister didn't need cultural assimilation so why did I? But after losing a fight a day for two weeks straight, I notched my first win over a boy named Rasheed Finch (we were friends again later that day) and life got a bit easier. I would come home and my mother would ask me if I had learned anything. If I had been telling the truth, I would have told her that you shouldn't worry about the loudmouths and big smack talkers, it's the quiet guys who clean clocks best. Skinny guys with lazy snarls and hamhock fists. Mothers like mine didn't need to know that in the space of a grade-school year, I had come to enjoy getting a "fair one" as we liked to put it.

Then, like now, one disconnected moment after another, no fluidity, bulbs flashing and popping up in odd unexpected places. Those old playground fights were swift. They ended quickly, usually on the ground, other boys scrambling to pull the two fighters apart. Boxing was interminable. It got so bad that you wanted to be knocked out. The first minute is pure nerves and adrenaline. You stand at one point in the ring and find yourself on the other side, the world tilted and unbalanced. You try your best to right the ship, but you're hurt and weary. Your eyes are blinded with tears and stinging sweat. Copper and blood fills your mouth. Your thighs, calves, and the balls of your feet burn like fire and inside of two minutes, you curse yourself; you want to quit the whole goddamn project.

The hundreds of hours that Blinky had spent training me in the Ammo Handling Room had gone to waste. The advice the skipper had given me, the officer meals stolen, the good-



natured ribbing, the swollen pride my shipmates felt on the bus on the way to the aircraft carrier. They fell away like false gods in desperate times.

Childs hit so clean, so fast, that it made me want to cry and quit. He was not a man, but a swarm of bees that stung from every angle. But wait, I get ahead of myself. In the first minute, Childs hadn't thrown a single punch. We clinched and unclinched. He studied my stance as if he were a fistic anthropologist, a scholar and critic. His mind performed difficult three-dimensional mathematical calculations as his eyes swept over my fighting stance. I threw occasional punches that Childs dismissed with economic slips. The sailors began to fidget. They wanted fireworks, a knockout. A man had been knocked out in the last fight. Child's singular concern was dispatching me in the most thorough and spectacular manner possible, and well, that might take a little time. I threw a doubled up jab and it touched Childs on the top of head.

"Nigga what?" he asked, but it was a rhetorical question. He seemed to be asking not who I was, but who was I according to what I had to offer. I swept in quickly and landed a body blow.

"Nigga *whahhh-ttt*." Childs said again. This time sweetly, as if I had been more agreeable. Childs was somehow pleased. With his long muscular arms, he began measuring the distance. His facial expression registered the completion of another calculation. Then Childs told me what he was going to do. Childs had completed the calculation, took note of the barometer of an impatient crowd, and was fresh out of give a fucks.

"Double up hook with the right cross." I could scarcely hear him.

Childs doubled up the hook and hit me with the right cross that was so fast I saw it only as he pulled it back, up and away. Someone in the ring had hit me with a pipe. I was on all fours holding up the heavy deck with as much

strength as I could. It felt as if someone stacked an extra plate on the left side of the bench. It was too heavy and I fell forward and to the left like a five month old struggling to climb. I found a rope and pulled myself up. By the count of eight, I was standing and struggling to focus. Then the bell rang. I walked to my corner, but there was no stool. There was no Chan and no Blinky and I saw faces laughing hilariously. I had walked to the wrong corner.

When I sat down in the proper corner, Blinky told me that I had taken his best punch and I was still up on my feet. That was a good sign. Chan held a cold rag around the base of my neck. He held up a water canister with the other. Blinky pressed the cold metal brace against the swelling on my left eye. Blinky continued talking, but I didn't hear a word. I watched my opponent across the ring. His trainer stood in front of him and I saw his shoulders rise and fall in quick succession. My own body was relaxed. I breathed easily.

"You hear a friggin word I just said?" I looked up at Blinky and I must have had that dumb look on my face.

"The fuck you smiling for?" Blinky was disgusted, then his face shifted. He laughed and patted me on the butt as the second round began.

I began to circle to the left, keeping away from his hook. Whenever I saw the flash of a lightbulb I rushed inside furiously, clinging more than enemies clinging. He threw me off easily, but it weighed on him and threw off the distance and momentum he had established. I continued this until the round ended and I felt a little better. The third round began with a mistake. I tried to lean out of his deadly hook. It caught me with my feet in an awkward position and I went straight back and fell through the ropes. Sailors danced in the aisles as if someone had thrown down a thunderous dunk. It looked far worse than it felt. I climbed back in the ring and I saw Blinky pick up the towel.

I saw Chan hold onto the towel and shake his head. Chan looked extraordinarily worried. I was already up on my feet.

The referee tapped my gloves and looked deep in my eyes. It was a flash knockdown, but Childs lost his cool composure and carried on as if he had put me to sleep. He jumped on the ropes and celebrated. The referee had to order Childs to fight because he was too busy celebrating. I pretended to be badly hurt and Childs came back at me, leaning in with his head and winding his left as if he were Sugar Ray and I was Hagler. Childs swung wildly this time. He was trying to put me through the ropes. The dramatic knockout. He dropped his gloves. He felt loose, and less respectful. That was when I tasted his left and found it wanting. I walked into it again just to make sure and when Childs threw it lazily, I planted my foot, stepped inside and socked Childs with a straight right that traveled no more than eighteen inches. Not some roundhouse right that floored the Corporal, but a straight, hard, economical blow that landed on the point of his chin. I had gone into the bee-filled woods and driven a stake with my sledgehammer. I followed with a hook that caught air, but only because Childs had fallen through a trap door. He was on the ring floor lying still, but there were neither spasms nor eye flutters. His eyes weren't even glossed over.

The referee held my arm and instructed me to go to the neutral corner, though he continued holding me. We both watched in as Childs's body and mind tried to reconcile the other. His eyes were slits and he seemed to be punching the air. He then regained his consciousness as the referee began counting. Childs was on the deck searching for the mouthpiece that flew out of his mouth when I hit him, then struggled to put his mouthpiece in using both gloves. This maneuver is somewhat difficult by a rested fighter in the safety of the dressing room and nearly impossible after being knocked down. But somehow, miraculously, Childs had managed to nearly do the impossible. The mouthpiece was

secure, but by then it was too late. The referee had already counted to ten, and in the opinion of the ship's saltiest sailors, my knockout of Childs had been the biggest upset in modern smoker's history, so much so, that my win seemed improbable. Too improbable. There was something amiss, and I sensed it even as the referee raised my hand in victory.

## Four

### *After the Fight*

After the knockout, Childs composed himself, but his face had been transfigured into a mask of disgust and humiliation as the referee raised my hand arm. I tried to pound gloves with him, an acknowledgement of one gladiator to another, but Childs would have nothing to do with that; he turned his back like a spoiled little boy. The crowd grew uneasy. Their champion had been knocked out. They were confused, like a desperate army in the fog awaiting the next command, but the finest warrior had been vanquished. A contagious streak of shouts and boos began coursing through the hanger bay. If the crowd had cups of beer, we would have been doused. They threw the next best thing; large plastic coolers full of bug juice. A small contingent of my uproarious shipmates followed me back to the Jet Shop. Suddenly, I had an entourage led by Blinky who was uncharacteristically quiet.

Inside the Jet Shop, Blinky took a leatherman from his shirt pocket and cut the tape in two strong thrusts. He pulled off each glove and still hadn't looked me in the eye. He was efficient and competent, like an emergency room

nurse. Something was wrong. I heard someone yell attention on deck and Commander Ferris strolled in with the admiral. Our bodies were at attention, but we remained smiling. The admiral could see that we were smiling, and he played a little game, making us wait a moment until he put us at ease. Then Ferris and the admiral smiled and we laughed and they laughed. All this happiness because I had beat another man in combat. Ferris came over and placed both hands on my shoulders. He positively beamed. I felt as if King David were putting laurels on my brow after a bloody battle. In my sweaty trunks and euphoric exhaustion, I felt brand new. It was all worth it now, even the gangster shit that we had pulled. Ferris and the admiral smiled big hard smiles. They both had creased, wind-reddened faces. They patted me on the back a few times and said a few words I can't even remember now. Before he left, Ferris pressed a piece of paper in my robe. My shipmates embraced me one by one. Before he hugged me, Brucey told me not to get so high and mighty.

"You and that Chinese motherfucker still my 'tagonists," he joked, but not so. His voice was nasally and drizzled, as if he always had a cold or sore throat. "I seen people forgets what they come from." His benny boys didn't hazard an embrace. The boys—Ponds, Heyward, and Fife—stood at a polite, eye fluttering distance. Then all the men closed quickly around me, and for a moment I thought I was in for a beatdown, not congratulations. I had had that feeling before as a kid, right before I was about to be jumped. We wrapped our arms around one another and Rabbi Jackson took a deep solemn breath and began to pray.

We said amen. Chan got up and nodded as if to say goodbye.

"Where you going?" I asked Chan. Blinky rubbed his fingers together. Money. He was going to search for Crews.

"Mind is always on the money, eh Chan?" Blinky sneered in Chan's direction. I had seen him act untoward Chan, but never outright hostility.

"Somebody got to do it," Chan retorted. "I be back."

"Alone?" I asked.

Chan was not used to collecting from men he did not know, especially brothers like Crews.

"No problem, my man," Chan reassured me. I was relieved that I wouldn't be forced to collect this one time. If I collected after my own fight, it would seem impure. I was in a buoyant mood and collecting money would spoil the moment. As Chan went through a hatch in the jet shop, Blinky took a moment to stare coldly at his back.

I was happy and silent as the duty van took us back to the ship. Blinky sat up front in the passenger's seat. Things may change. Things may definitely change after this. The way the CO had his hands on my shoulder, as if I were about to marry his oldest daughter or something. There were other considerations that might keep me grounded. I then remembered what Chief said. If I didn't make third class, I'd have to endure another three months of mess cranking. Maybe things wouldn't change at all. Maybe chief would be more of an asshole than ever now that I was fifth fleet champ. He'd probably think I was getting too uppity and that I needed a little humility. That was chief for you. I'd won a huge fight. There would be attaboys and hail fellows and then it'd be back to mess cranking. It was nasty, filthy work and the thought of steaming off food trays in the hot scullery, or cleaning a load of black patrol socks stiffened with dry semen...well I just put the thought out of my mind. As we made our way to the boat, the carrier faded away. The desert sky grew dark, yet still burned brilliantly low and to the west. The droning ventilation faded away. Looking back at the carrier, it was beautifully lit, dressed for port by electricians who strung up holiday lighting for and aft and along the catwalks. Ferris came over the 1MC once and said that ships looked good in port, but that's not what they were for.

I became aware of the slow percussion of bumps in the road. I hadn't noticed how quiet it had gotten. Most of my shipmates were asleep: Rabbi Jackson, Brucey and his benny boys; Hutch—who looked like a ballpeen hammer, Bilbray—who had flew the confederate flag in DC workspace, and a few others in the second circle. Sailors could sleep anywhere. I had seen a sailor asleep in the gun station while the five inches were blasting round after round. Three of us were still awake: myself, the duty driver, and Blinky. Something had come between us. Blinky that is. Not us, exactly, but something between himself and Chan.

I closed my eyes but did not sleep. I went through the fight in my head, seeing how Childs set me up to absorb those clean left hooks to the head. I flinched, half asleep as he slugged me in my mind's eye. I felt an audible crack to my ribs. Even in my head the fight was exhausting—real sweat began to roll down my temples. Childs was a machine with a brutal hook that almost put me to sleep. In my head again, in an instant, I saw Childs pull a murderous hook that would have put me through the ropes. My eyes opened. Had Childs pulled a punch? Like schoolyard fights, he had scared the living shit out of me, but in the end, he was not unlike the other boys. Had he pulled that murderous hook? Then I remembered how Childs ran out of gas so quickly that there was no way he could have trained for the fight. His shoulders may have felt leaden at the time. I guess anything could happen when a fighter is tired. When he's hit and the question suddenly arises out of pain. What the hell am I doing here? Childs was like Liston, a dreadnaught everyone thought was invincible, until those weaknesses were exposed by speed and cunning. Or was he?

A few days before the fight, Blinky said that when Cassius Clay won the heavyweight title over Sonny Liston, he didn't party, drink, or partake of the women who stood watch outside his Miami hotel. Instead, Clay ate ice cream with Angelo Dundee, Bundini Brown, and a few of his closest

friends. He said a prayer with his mentor, Malcolm X, then watched television and went to bed. And at the press conference the next day, Clay told the press that from now on, they were to call him Muhammad Ali. "If you win this, you'll be a new man," Blinky had said wistfully, almost apologetically.

I checked the damage in mirror in the berthing head. My eyes were puffy and bloodshot. Deep red welts rose like dunes on my cheeks. I leaned over the sink, and something (a cracked rib?) pinched my right lung. I breathed in. The head smelled like sailor shit. Cleanliness wasn't a priority. I took a long hot shower, made difficult because of an annoying water conservation device. You had to depress a button and hold it down to keep the water flowing, and because of this device, you never felt fully clean or rinsed off. That was the thing with the fleet- a million goddamn little things pissed you off. I couldn't wash myself while the water flowed. I held the showerhead against my ribs, where I felt the soreness surfacing from Child's heavy blows. I took my time toweling off in the head. In the mirror, I could see a thin shadow across my chin. I smiled. Soon, I would have to buy a razor and begin shaving. While brushing my teeth, I heard someone sniff loudly from the toilets. A couple of boondockers tapped a staccato beat, punctuated by sluggish whistling. Then I heard grunting and spilling coming from the direction of the shitters.

A drunken sailor's bowel movement. Foul flatulence filled the head. There was nothing worse than brushing your teeth while another man was taking a shit, so I spat the foam in the sink and finished drying off near my rack. I still had a few hours of liberty, before I had to head back.

I got dressed and went aft to check Chan's rack. I smelled his cologne, a spicy citrus that he'd bartered for at a Kowloon market. Chan left the market upset because he thought he'd been given a tourist price. Chan had looked at



me. He had thousands of dollars in his pocket and he'd been pissed over a little coin. He was gone now, the coffin locker that purposefully kept nothing of value in shut with some three-dollar combination bullshit. I went around checking everyone's rack, except for Blinky. Nothing.

I sat in the lounge, alone, and turned on the television. The ship piped two channels through the ship, but depending on the duty ET (tonight it was Decouteux) you could flip all the way up to channel 69 (they had no originality) and find a tonight's special porn presentation. I flipped the channel up to 69 and quickly tired of close ups on pale, pimply asses, but I continued to watch it while waiting for the cum shot, or someone who wanted to go into town. It wasn't a very brisk video. I got bored and took a walk around the main deck. Still nothing but duty personnel. We had a buddy policy in foreign ports. No buddy, no liberty. It was a good idea in theory; a buddy could look out for you and prevent you from getting the shit kicked out of you. But that same buddy could get you into a world of shit. You had to pick your buddy sometimes weeks in advance. The last week before pulling into port felt like a game of cards. And everyone wanted to know what cards you were holding. You looked at the three section duty roster and set up alliances: first, second, and third picks. Church boys clung to one another in clumps. (Rabbi Jackson was the exception, preferring to be on the front lines of sin with his shipmates as they paid bar fines.) The Filipinos left the quarterdeck looking for the local Filipino community where they were inevitability received like conquering heroes. Pedophiles stuck close together, though they pretended to be lost when you saw them holding hands with little boys that had been "adopted". You saw which officers were drunks. The liberty policy could also bring together sailors who normally would might not be seen with one another. I've seen benny boys hang with grown men who wore Star Trek shirts. Confederates asked permission to leave the

ship alongside black nationalists. And then the ship had certain personnel who were beyond categorizing. Petty Officer Dubose (Porgy) Prevost was a cane stalk of a man, a wiry and seemingly raceless native of Louisiana, a brilliant autodidact who was both engaging and aloof. Crewmembers asked him if he was black or white, and Prevost would nod his head and say yet. Are you Spanish or Portuguese? Again, Prevost would nod his head and say yes. Is your father a big-dicked mule and your momma a Cajun whore? He answer never varied with the question. He might engage the entire crew in the chow hall on the beauty of Creole women in New Iberia. He might also go on for weeks living by the sentry's fifth order, that is, to talk to no one except in the line of duty. And as a cryptologist he could prepare his reports on the compute and leave them in his division's officer's inbox. He ranked first in all his evaluations. The officers would not talk to him for fear that an enlisted man would expose them for the intellectual and familial frauds that they were. Rumor went that Prevost's biological father was a Oxford educated white man who ran for the Senate on a "fairness" campaign—the candidate promised to abolish corruption, nepotism, and affirmative action in the "most efficient manner known to the courtly South".

In port, Prevost had never been seen with woman nor benny boy, yet he was rejected and respected by both, and instead of paying bar fines, imbibing, or reading scriptures to the natives while in foreign ports, Prevost would sit in the lounge studying one of the many philosophy, mathematic, or linguistic journals that had arrived during mail call. And now, while sitting in the lounge, he spoke his first direct words to me.

"Lion, what's it like to separate a man from his faculties? One senses that it is both barbaric and yet, physically poetic." he asked.

"It was all right, I guess."

"Did you get any satisfaction?"

"I thought so, earlier, but not a little less now."

"It will either humanize you, or make you immune to your own cruelty. What is your current status? You on duty?"

"No, Petty Officer Prevost"

"Then why watch the worst porno on rotation. Let's get the fuck out of this slave ship. And please, call me Porgy." He wore black Levi jeans, so worn gray wear spots in all the pivot points they seemed about to fall apart. He wore a black Black Flag t-shirt. I knew this because Silarz wore this same civilian outfit because there was no room in his locker for anything else. He was known to have a two or three pair of skivvies and the same number of socks. The rest of his locker was filled with books on 20<sup>th</sup> century semiotics, philosophy, and linguistic theory.

"You need a buddy?" I asked.

I went midships to hang out and hope to get lucky when I heard Petty Officer Dubose call out to me in the passageway.

I was now communal property. My days of invisibility were over. The gloss and the specialness. The piece of paper. The hotel.

I laid down ready for taps when Rabbi Jackson parted the curtains on my rack. Rabbi Jackson was neither Rabbi nor chaplain, but he held Sunday worship services on the mess decks and some of the sailors took his counsel.

"Pray with me, Lion," Jackson said.

"What the fuck for?" I asked.

"Because God most certainly blessed you today," Jackson said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"I'll tell you after we pray." And so I closed my eyes and Rabbi Jackson prayed. It was actually more of a story, than a prayer. The story was about a young farm boy who left home because he hated the farm and his father's stern

disciplinary ways. But when the boy found himself in the unforgiving wilderness, he needed that discipline to survive and return. Jackson was just a pain in the ass first class gunner's mate who was always trying to get Blinky and I to join his mess deck church and get saved. He'd been an assistant pastor at a backwoods southern Illinois church before he joined the Navy. "Saved for what?" Blinky used to sneer, "Eggplant heaven?"

Blinky had gotten sick of Jackson trying to save him all the goddamn time from that "pointy headed devil in Rome." Blinky got so mad he called Jackson "stupid fucking Rabbi Jackson." Jackson stopped trying to save Blinky, but it was too late for Jackson. The name stuck.

"Do you believe in God, Lion?"

"When I really need something."

"For real?"

"No, not really."

"No, not really when you need something or no not really you don't believe in God?"

"Don't take it personal, Rabbi, but I don't really believe in God."

Rabbi Jackson cocked his head to the left, as if he were puzzled. He wasn't at all upset.

"After that fight, I think you might consider it. Now go have a good night's sleep." Jackson closed my curtains. I stayed up for a while and thought about what Jackson said. He had actually startled me. I didn't know if Jackson was serious, but he didn't appear to be kidding.

Fucking horse hair blankets and three inch mattress. I wanted a real bed. With white sheets and a white duvet. I wanted a real woman, not a whore worth three haircuts. I wanted to sleep all day and not be awakened by a hundred farting, grumbling, grappling, masturbating men. I didn't want to be like the old, resentful salts twenty years from now.

As I stood in the chow line, Dawkins, the first class mess specialist asked me to follow him. Dawkins owed some money, but payday was a week away so what the fuck did he want? I thought I had violated one of his many chow line rules, but he kept smiling at me and punching me lightly in the shoulder. I sat in his smallish office. The office had all the trappings of a lifer- Walmart-style family photos haphazardly mounted, the inane Navy leadership calendar that asked you if you spoken a kind word to a subordinate today, various bullshit Navy mottos. Dawkins came in with a steak dinner that he had been saving for the CO, but the CO was getting fucked up, CO style, in the O-5 admin set up with his buddies from the rest of the battle group. I attacked that goddamn steak. Later, Dawkins brought in bread pudding topped with homemade vanilla ice cream. The meal was delicious and afterwards, he handed me a photo album. Old guys always gave me little mementos to remind me that back in the day, they were the shit, too. It's a small price to pay and I didn't mind it too much. There were photos of a youthful Seaman Dawkins, skinny and beaming, in his first foreign port. I laughed to myself. He wore his black Navy issue belt and shiny chlorfram shoes with civilian jeans and t-shirt- a straight nerd move. A crude cardboard blue sky in the background, with Dawkins in his dress blues and his wife, still thin and pretty, in the foreground. His wife aged quickly. By the middle of the album, Rita-- she was Mexican or something, must have weighed three hundred pounds. Three out of the five kids looked like they had three different fathers.

"You got yourself a beautiful family, Dawk."

Dawkins was a sorry lifer son of a bitch, living paycheck to paycheck, probably from the time he joined up. Chan considered cutting him off because Dawk was way behind scheduled payments. Guys like Dawk kept the Navy running, even as the Navy ran guys like Dawk. He was probably a million dollars in debt, yet he kept re-upping and re-upping

as if this enlistment would be the very last one, the one where he'd break even. Dawkins was the best cook in the fleet and yet, eighteen years into his enlisted life, here he was, still bucking for chief and kissing the ass of a kid he might serve with, at best, in two duty stations. I told Dawkins to forget about the three yards that he owed Chan. If Chan had a problem with it, then Chan could take it out of my winnings. I told Dawkins to stay out of the Chief's poker game because it would reflect badly on my judgment. Dawkins had this huge grin and it made me feel alright. Dawkins needed all the money he could get with all the mouths he had to feed.

After dinner, I walked aft towards berthing. The boatswain mate on the bridge had passed darken ship, and the lonesome passageway was illuminated by red lighting. A JP-5 pump cycled to life, scaring the shit out of me for moment. Seawater sloshed at a bend in the firemain piping. Red-tinted darkness and ghostly machinery creeped me out as I happened to pass the ship's Barber Shop. The light was on. I hadn't had a haircut in three weeks. I opened the hatch and was instantly sorry. The duty barber was Ponds, one of Bruce's little benny boys. Bruce's boys weren't real live Thai or Filipino benny boys. Real benny boys were more feminine than women. Chan pointed them out to me when we pulled into the Philippines. Chan gave me the whole spiel. Real benny boys wrapped themselves in a girdle, were always on their "period", and always offered blowjobs or much worse, "other stuff to make you happy". It didn't matter if you were drunk, or how beautiful she was, or how great the hormone pills made her look. Great tits meant nothing. She was still a goddamn benny boy. If news got back to the ship that you had been with a benny boy, things could be messy. It was alright to be a benny boy because that was simply their nature. You really had to be fucked in the head to want to be one. We looked upon them with a certain amount of tenderness. But to be fooled by a benny boy was tantamount

to being a real live homosexual, a faggot, a goddamn gazer. We kicked the living shit out of gazers. We'd lure some gazer down into shaft alley (how appropriate) then tape him to the chair and begin ripping the tape off his skin for starters. The engineers did it to me on my first watch and it brought tears to your eyes. More often than not, gazers got the shit kicked out of them for at least six months, or until someone forget, or until they had enough and requested to be transferred, which meant that they were not only a gazer, but a wimpy gazer at that, and that meant more beatings. No one would kick the shit out of Ponds, even if he popped a menthol cough drop in his mouth and started staring at your crouch like a three haircut whore. Ponds was our benny boy. He was one of us, we just didn't let him ever know.

I tried to close the hatch, but I was too late and Ponds called out to me in his affected southern drawl. "Don't be scared, Lion. You get in here and get yourself tightened up by ole Ponds." I didn't like the sound of that all.

The smallish Ponds sat cross-legged in the middle chair of three red barber chairs. He held a remote control, pointed it at the small television mounted on the aluminum bulkhead, and turned it off in the most delicate manner imaginable. He thought he was in somebody's salon or parlor or something. All that time, Ponds was looking me up and down.

"Sure," I said. And I dragged myself in.

Ponds was on his feet, snapping a beige barber's smock like a happy ass bullfighter. He tapped the seat of the chair gently with his small, elfish hands.

"What's going on Ponds?" I asked, foolishly trying to make small talk. I sat down. Ponds pumped up the chair. He wheeled me around so that we both faced the mirror. He placed his gentle fingers on my temples and stared at my reflection.

"I heard about your fight," Ponds said salaciously. I laughed. What did he mean heard? I had seen him there with Bruce, the master at arms. "Big, bad, Lion. Well you don't look so bad right now. Your eyes puffed up a little bit. Let me put a little something on the swelling."

"What is so funny?" he asked as he clucked his tongue. He put a dab of ointment on his fingers and rubbed them into the swelling. It stung for a second, but a moment later it felt good and numb. I leaned back and relaxed. Ponds was short, funny, and audacious. He did what he had to do to survive. His face pulled down to a point, and he always seemed to be looking up at you, like a puppy, wishing that some young man might come and pet him. His nose was large and flared and I could see the faintest hint of makeup. Like he had been watching Patti Labelle. The shadow gave his nose the illusion of thinness. He was a little black Truman Capote who loved doing hair. Ponds couldn't just cut the damn thing. He was always touching your temples and wheeling you around and pumping the chair up and combing your hair out and asking you what you wanted to emanate. It was a word he liked to use. He indulged the other sailors, and for a benny boy, he was quite popular. Sailors loved sitting in Ponds' chair, even our CO, because Ponds was always good for gossip and conversation. The haircut was incidental as he would drawl on and on about who was going to mast, or gaining weight, cheating on his wife, or who had a thing for benny boys.

From our few conversations, and basic shipboard knowledge, I knew as much. Ponds was a Southern boy who joined the Navy to get away from north Georgia. Ponds liked to say that he had always been happy and purple. He knew since he was a child. And so did the other children, and they treated him accordingly. I guess he had enough random bashings and all the unwelcome advances of the older men. The Navy offered consistent bashings and more youthful



sailors to choose from. Ponds continued telling me all this until I told him to knock it off.

"Could you shut the fuck up and cut my hair?" I asked nicely.

"Guess you don't want to hear about what I heard on the mess decks," Ponds said. "I heard people been buying gold chains and Rolex watches from that fight you had. Bruce asked me if I wanted to put something on you. I told him I was sending money back to my momma. Bruce said, 'If you put something on Lion then you can make your momma real proud.' Now what you make of that, Lion?"

"I'd say scared money don't make money."

Ponds pursed his benny boy lips. "Hmmm. I guess so. You want it tapered or squared in the back?"

Weeks later, we were out of the Gulf, heading southeast with the Indian subcontinent to port. I had gotten time to think about what Ponds and Rabbi Jackson meant. And it didn't seem to amount to anything. All I had to do was keep my nose clean and play the game for a few more months. I had to lay low during chow, when I'd normally be making my rounds for Chan right around payday. I avoided Chan, but at the same time, I needed to know. Did Childs take a dive? I mean hell, let me get my ass kicked if I deserved an ass-kicking. Chan continued to lend money, but there was no one to collect it. Chan stopped asking me. Chan asked Blinky a million times, until finally Blinky agreed. Then Blinky ended up in medical for a couple of days when he asked this radioman named Sturdivant why he was delinquent with Chan's money. Sturdivant didn't even say anything, just smiled as he walked by, then, as soon as Blinky walked past, Sturdivant pushed Blinky face first into a sea water pump. Blinky told me not to worry about it when I saw him in medical. "Petty sit," he whistled between his absent front teeth. "Don't even twip." Then I learned a disturbing piece of news. Sturdivant won a lot of money on my fight and made

his noise like everyone else, but he just wouldn't shut the hell up. He was getting word from his boys on the carrier. Something about my fight with Childs.

By the time we'd left the Gulf, I had become a golden boy. I couldn't walk the passageways unnoticed. Crewmembers who had paid me no mind just a few weeks ago, now smiled and raised their fists in mock salute. For the first time, redneck Chief noticed my unpolished boots. I couldn't wear a shitty uniform, or go a day without shaving, or slip into the chow line as I had done before. I found myself choosing tables on the mess decks with more discretion, like the little girl who begins her campaign for most popular as a freshman. But there were benefits, too. I had overprepared for the engine room qualification board. The board asked me a few perfunctory questions and they signed right off. Bam. Qualified. Chan happened to be on the board and the night before, he told me what he would ask. With my new watch rotation, I couldn't spend as much time with Chan and Blinky. I thought about how things were happening all at once, and during a respite from log taking, I went down to shaft alley and began working on a self-improvement list.

*List of shit to do and not to do, because I'm going to be an officer now:*

*Do not beat off in shaft alley, even though it's a poetic, reaffirming, and seemingly revolutionary act, too many niggas have begun doing it, and it's becoming a bit common.*

*Just because everybody takes a piss in the bilge or beats off in shaft alley doesn't mean you have to.*

*No more Monday Night Porn in aft steering.*

*No more kicking ass for Chan. I don't care what he says or tries to blackmail me for.*

*No more fights just because.*

Polish boondockers to a mirror sheen. Iron shirt and wear dark dungarees. You're officer material so act like it.

Don't talk too much or be seen too much with Brucey's benny boys. People might talk, even though them niggas is funny as hell, talking about they don't give a fuck if I'm gonna be an officer, they still gonna talk shit.

Make peace with Bruce on DL. Truce with Chan?

No more three haircut whores. No more East Coast Jazz Club on Magsaysay Road. If you must then get condom.

Don't ever, ever, love them hoze at the East Coast Jazz Club on Magsaysay Road. And if you do, use condoms. You're officer material now, so act like it, and stay out of the clap line.

Don't piss off Chief, because everybody knows he doesn't like black people and he damn sure don't like officers so what do you think he thinks of you?

And stop being a smart ass to Chief. His wife is a pig, so being a smart ass makes it worse.

Be friends with more white boys. Select white boys that you know. Blinky is cool, but he can only take a brother so far.

Now that you're gonna be an officer, you can't just come out and ask girls for some pussy anymore. Get some sonnets or something, and be like, hey shorty, let me read this to you.

Trust white people that you know. The others can be two-faced.

What about white girls?

No getting high with them niggas on the catwalk anymore, period.

Shave every day, and try to write home to mom.

You do have a mother, remember?

Remember where you came from. (Whatever this means)

As I looked at the list, I felt a presence behind me. It didn't matter that I couldn't hear over the metallic

whine of the gas turbine engines. It's a sixth sense that I developed so that Chief Dickwad could never catch me slipping on watch. I can't really explain it, but it's like a good cop who can just tell if a motorist doesn't have insurance. It just works that way. I looked up behind me, and saw the familiar bowlegged walk. Chan wore his hair slicked back. He seemed shorter, but he was almost as tall as me. His face was wide open, and rarely expressive, unless embarrassed. He was an only son who sent most of his money back home. He was also way too smart to be in the Navy. Unfortunately, Chan had been a lackadaisical student and by the time he was fifteen, the Honolulu police knew him by name.

"What's up, you Chinese looking motherfucker?"

"What are you talking about? I am Chinese."

"I'd call you Chinese no matter where you were from. Can't you see that I'm culturally insensitive, you goddamn slope? We need to put you guys back in those internment camps."

"That was the Japanese."

"Yeah, so what?" It was a running joke. Chan said that if you were Asian, then sailors would call you Chinese. If you were Vietnamese, then they called you Filipino. It just didn't matter. You were a fucking coolie, Chan said, but they didn't admit as much. Chan thought he was superior to the Filipinos. I could tell by the way he insisted that they were not even remotely related. Filipinos had their own thing. They were a central part of the Navy and they definitely had their own clique. They had their own little Filipino basketball league. They were jackrabbits, streaming furiously up and down the court, never getting above the rim, while the brothers crossed over and smiled while they waited for spots to open on "A" court. I'd see them at the base park playing tennis and barbecuing stray puppies. Or I'd see a million of them coming out of a wedding at the base catholic church. The older generation were disbursing

clerks, the supply clerks, and in some cases, electricians. And now, they were sending their sons and daughters to college, and now there were officers like LT Deguia, who I thought was pretty cool. Chan didn't like Flips one bit anymore because Deguia was cool. He said they were classless and materialistic.

Chan's eyes swept across the bright gas turbine enclosure, the main reduction gears, and the shiny, rotating shaft. He was inspecting my watchstation. "When did you qualify engine room?" Chan asked.

"What are you talking about, you were on my qualification board?"

"Was I?" I pulled out my qualification papers and showed Chan where he'd signed two weeks ago.

"Says so right here."

"White they?"

"Pronounce those r's, you Chinese motherfucker." Chan immediately went for my legs. And of course, this led to another wrestling session, and once again, I knotted up Chan in a matter of a minute and made him call me uncle. We rested under a ventilation fan. It was hot as hell in that engine room.

"What are you doing later on?"

"Why?" I asked.

"I need a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"Does it matter?"

"Certain favors I don't do no more," I said. Chan walked over to the hull. He pulled his dick out and began urinating in the bilge. "Not on my watch," I yelled, but Chan couldn't hear me. I waited until he got back.

"Sturdivant owes me money," Chan said.

"Everybody owes you money."

"Yeah, but he tells me to fuck off."

"Why is Sturdivant the only dude who's telling you to fuck off?"

"Because he can, that's why."

And I didn't have to ask him, because then I already knew. This whole thing was a farce. The whole ship knew because Sturdivant couldn't keep his mouth shut. Sturdivant knew because he and Childs had known each other since Boot Camp and stayed in touch. When Sturdivant bragged that his shipmate had knocked him out, Childs' pride wouldn't allow him to suppress the true story. Childs should have knocked me out. He would have knocked me out had Chan not got a hold of him for a thousand dollars.

"I'm sorry," Chan said. "I didn't know what it meant to you until it was too late. But I still need that favor, you know what I'm saying?"

I knew what Chan wanted. He had loaned Sturdivant five hundred dollars and a week after payday, Chan pulled Sturdivant aside on the mess decks and asked him what the delay was.

"You can have it," he told Chan menacingly, "if you take it." Sturdivant pulled out ten one hundred dollar bills from his dungaree pockets and flaunted the money he owed Chan. Word had gotten around that debts to Chan could go unpaid.

I asked Chan how much money he was going to lose.

"It's not about the money," Chan said. He meant just the opposite. It was about money. Chan continued. "It's about respect. It's about you. Me. Blinky. The crew grip, you know?"

"What about me?"

"You been playing me close, my man."

"I'm just trying to keep my nose clean."

"You're doing a good job, my man. That's for sure." He had taken off his dungaree shirt and we stood under the vent fans in our t-shirts. Outside, in the Indian Ocean, the temperature was about a hundred and six degrees. The engine room was about a hundred and twenty, but you get used to it.

I looked at Chan. What did he want? And had I gotten used to too much?

"My man. I need one last favor," Chan pleaded. "Just one more, my man."

Boats called out darken ship on the 1MC.

## Five

*Ascension*

Late summer clung unloved in Newport. Tans and chances were fading for the Annapolis boys along the beach and in the bars on Thames. The boys had already begun to hunker down on weeknights, gathering on Thursdays to watch television with old classmates from Juliett Company. As for me, the token ROTC roommate, I felt uncomfortable around these insular reunions, and so often escaped to feel the premature chill seep into the evening air. In the trunk of my old Saab I kept handy a Navy-issue wool sweater because evenings had both a dramatic and meteorological arc.

That evening, the downtown Opera House began showcasing a number of critically acclaimed independent films. This year's themes: LOVE and DESIRE and LONGING. All caps included. I called a date, then bought movie tickets in the

late afternoon while the sun's strength was fading, but still bright and warm. My date, a metropolitan import from Providence, Boston, or as far as New Haven, was usually a very bright girl just out of college who would always wear sunglasses that balanced a polished, orthodontic smile. She often had one of those nouveau ethnic elite names, a generation removed from names inspired by the struggle. My date—the names Natasha, Selena, or Giselle come to mind—and I would watch the movie and admire its ambivalent ending, while waiting for her brand name artistic erudition to engage. I was fond of Opera House movies because their quixotic endings always inspired further discourse, as the beautiful educated dates liked to say. I considered myself a gentleman of graduated nuances, appreciative of all that was sublime, like those endings that required a cozier venue to discuss themes and subtext in greater detail. Inevitably, the date led to our slightly modern home that we were renting from a retired Admiral. But I speak too soon.

Just outside the lobby, I would quicken my step and open those heavy Vienna doors, yes, the ones inlaid with thick crystal, and light would pour in and illuminate her perfectly square and translucent nails. They were always perfectly translucent, not a light spot on a single cuticle. In the dark, I would watch her eyes sparkle against the fluttering light of the movie screen. Afterwards, I would gently ask my date if she'd like to continue our conversation at a café where a finely crusted tiramisu and I had been previously and tastefully introduced. I did not tell her that I had introduced others to the café's fine pastries.

We would leave the theater and walk those first cold steps—and this was beautiful and required impeccable timing—I would ask a complicated question in order to give my date pause. While pondering the answer, she would be visually arrested by the scene that unfolded while we sat in the dark theater.



The sun had set, lampposts lit, a chill would have been replaced by warmth, and a low fog would have settled in, giving the town a vaguely Praguish feel. My date would watch the mist swirling about streetlights and a curl of a smile would form at the edge of her mouth as she had already forgotten the question, but it mattered not. On her face, I would watch erudition pause before confused awe and this is what she would be thinking. Had a clutch of crew hands changed the set, transforming Newport into an artful European city? And turning to look at me, would silently ask, And by the way, who is this heretofore harmlessly bland brother with the odd name doing charming me without my expressed written permission?

The Opera House peaked a turn on a sloped, cobblestone avenue, garrisoned on the elevated end of a one way street, and through the fog you could see rumbling headlamps, hear gears lowering, tires thumping, and it seemed so dramatic the first few times that I waited for a director to step out of the shadowy alley and yell cut.

Even as I watched her face soften, I felt alone with headlamps, streetlights, and polished cobblestones, alone in an urban forest filmed in black and white. I would have almost forgotten my mission, which was to take her home, but the memory of pear scented lotion snapped me out of it.

I would turn towards the bright girl and tell her that she looked cold and that I had a Navy-issue wool sweater and, on cue, she would catch the chills and hold her self. I would help the girl don the Navy-issue wool sweater and she would feel warm again. The tea and tiramisu would be excellent, and we would go back to my place.

Although I detested the gesture, this was as good a time as any to take her hand.

Back at the house, the boys from Annapolis: Jarski, Haas, and Armstrong, all excellent wingmen, would carry me through. Their years at boat school, full of cunning pets, sexual suppression, the compartmentalization of obedience

and lust, had inured them from the act of cock-blocking. The boys acted with the precision of desert hawks working in consort, flying from cacti to cacti, weaving, trapping, and finally, dissecting the longhaired prey.

After I excused myself upstairs to the restroom, I would listen surreptitiously at the head of the stairs. My roommates were battle-hardened veterans in the war of funneling unsure women. Jarski offered her a drink. Any drink. He enjoyed being tested. Jarski was not the hardest working Annapolis boy (when he wasn't sleeping during Navigation, he enjoyed reading The Economist, which was obscured by the angled chart table), nor the highest scoring, but he was the most fashionable white boy I have ever known, and I've known many white boys. Jarski had another useful talent; he was a skilled bartender; his specialty was a Texas Pussywillow, a mint-julep style drink that he had learned from a Virginia girl with a fondness for horses and Midshipmen, but, to paraphrase Steve McQueen, horses cannot make Texas Pussywillows, but Jarski could.

Armstrong picked up the slack by asking about her goals. He had a powerful rural Georgia charm and had the good sense to throttle back when necessary. He subtly complimented the girl on her mind and her wonderful personality. Haas, a bright, sun-drenched boy who would go on to switch designators and fly F/A-18s, would suggest, no, insist, that we go out on the deck and watch the stars and the lighthouse across the bay. If she were especially talented (as he liked to describe the more attractive dates) Haas would rise to the occasion. He waited until the second drink before coming out on deck with a beautiful quilt that he said was made by his fiancé's great-grandmother, the matron of a wealthy shipbuilding family who still had a home a few blocks from the Breakers. Haas' story went something like this: after he had proposed during Christmas holiday, the Ingalls family, appreciative but without a gift for the boy they had underestimated, decided to give him the quilt

from the guestroom. It was a wonderful story. Sometimes, Haas said it was the last bottle of dry Riesling from the family vineyard. Or a sweater knitted during the Battle of the Bulge, returned unused, because a favorite son had either died in battle, or lived and returned home. Haas' contributions by way of creative storytelling cannot be overstated. Haas would do anything for his Annapolis boys, and now he was doing it for me.

It was true that Haas was engaged to a woman of Newport society, but the quilt had been purchased on sale at the Wal-Mart, after Armstrong had abused a menstruating girl in Haas' bed. Though Haas may have been upset, I couldn't see it in his face. Even serious fuck-ups were pardoned if they had been committed in pursuit of a liaison, but only if said liaison had been successful, but this was Armstrong and he never failed.

A few years later, I would laugh and weep at Haas' funeral. Those who truly knew Haas had to burst in laughter when the family asked friends to come to the microphone to tell stories about the favored son. I repressed the urge tell the world that this man, who sought to travel the cosmos as an astronaut, whose remains could barely fill a cardboard hamburger box, was a man you could depend upon to tell the most extravagant tale to get you laid. No lie was too great. They don't make men like Haas anymore. But here, in the quilt covered den, Haas was alive and well, had not yet met his god while conducting nighttime carrier qualifications, telling the girl about this quilt, that still had a tag attached that read "Made in Vietnam".

My date would feel comfortable and smile warmly. No longer did she have the "date" mask on. She felt at ease in the comfort of good men. She had already begun thinking of the Annapolis boys in terms of sword-wielding, arch-making groomsmen. The calculus of attraction tipped incrementally in my direction as the Annapolis boys made her feel like the luckiest girl in the world. Inevitably, she would yawn and

ease her entire weight into my arms. We looked across the bay at the red, green, and white navigation lights. A sailboat, under motor, less than twenty meters. A fishing vessel, gear out to starboard, in a long sweeping turn to port. Between kisses, she would admit that before our date, she hadn't felt especially attracted to me. (They never do) In fact, when she told her roommate my name, the roommate had burst out laughing, and began to make hyena cackles, as if she was the first to think of that. The girl had gone out with me because she had nothing better to do, and although I would probably be a snooze, she felt that I was rather safe.

Safe. That word.

Safe meant I didn't shake to the Harlem shuffle when sushi was offered, screaming out, "Uhhh. Raw fish!!" Safe meant that I could blend within the strata of race and class. Safe meant that I played basketball, but I could also ski, play tennis, and for good measure, sail. Safe meant that she could take me home to meet Daddy, that I could mingle with her brother's friends. Safe meant future lawyer, doctor, engineer, MBA, or PhD. Some level of advancement beyond a bachelor's because that was merely a precursor, a filter, a stage for bigger accomplishments. As far as I was concerned, safe meant a life free of random fucks, psychedelic drugs, southern rap music, and socioeconomic displays on the local news. Safe could never be fun and I hadn't always been safe.

Private schools were on the whole safer than public. Ivy League was definitely safe, but only if you kept it reasonably real and didn't Tom around too much in the Phi Kappa Alpha or SAE or the Campus Republicans or whatever organizations Toms were joining. These days, only a handful of black colleges were still safe. Morehouse was safe and so was Hampton with its beautiful, acquisitive daughters with fathers ready to splurge on a wedding. Hampton girls made perfect wives for professional athletes and rappers. Norfolk State was absurdly ghetto, with its sparse grass and bass

driven parking lots. Spellman embodied female safety, but I've never liked Spellman girls. They were worse than radical Brooklyn lesbians with dreadlocks. Actually, they were lesbians with dreadlocks. Artists and writer's were safe only in the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie, and marginally acceptable in the lower reaches, but only if you were a woman and successful. If you were unknown then forget about it. A black unknown artist has about as much cache as an unknown actor living in New York City. Interesting, but call me when you get some money, they'd say. I was fortunate enough to have been educated at a university that appeared on a list pre-approved schools for the ever-burgeoning class of black technocrats. Watch us rise beyond race! And this girl, raised with rapacious social awareness, had declared me safe. And now, I was beyond safe; I was into new territory. I became interesting.

This one, whatever her name was, had incidentally grown accustomed to a fervent new class of white boys who chased black girls in the light of day with demonstrable romantic effort. College-educated black men were a different story:

"Brothers these days", she said wearily while taking off the sweater, "expected hot fresh pussy served on the good china. They don't even go through the motions, but you", she said, "you, I have to give some credit to. You laid some groundwork. Where's the ladies' room?"

Just admit it, I wanted to ask, you've already decided to sleep with me. Instead of asking, I gathered myself while she was in the bathroom, contemplating how my literary hero would conduct himself in this situation. I had just read a memoir by Anatole Broyard in which he described an unlikely gentleman nonchalantly as a "pussy gangster". That scene, that phrase, ran through me, not with a jolt of recognition, but a warm wave of belonging. It was a secretive club I wanted to belong to. I wanted to be nonchalant, detached, romantic, and unsentimental, all while embodying the ethos of the quiet, nondescript pussy gangster. I wanted to be

James Salter, but this is America, where only Anglo-Saxon descendents aspire to unmatched heights.

I was back in character by the time she finished. Without asking her to spend the night, I offered her a t-shirt and shorts. She declined with a smile, not a yawn, and we kissed again, this time with the force of her tongue. Her mouth tasted like fig leaves. We undressed slowly as if there was all the time in the world, and then I felt her impatience. It had taken more time usual, but she finally came around. I had been waiting for this moment from the time we met. I felt it again when I looked at her face on the set of the Opera House. She had a supple pear scent or so I pretended. That pear scent belonged to M. Nicole Mansur, the only girl I have ever loved. Nicole was the girl I made love to while pretending to make love to the women I had sex with. Or something like that. And so once more, like a moth returning to his phosphorescent tomb, I went back to Nicole's womb the only way I knew how.

Before she departed the following Friday morning, the bright girl was somewhat taken aback by the sudden lack of graciousness from the Annapolis boys. Jarski and Haas were enjoying a cup of coffee, watching the news, when she bounded down the steps, her hair freshly fucked, expecting to be assaulted with sweetness from the whole crew. None came forth. They pointed to the cup and told her where to find the cream and sugar. It was as if they had slept with her as well, and now could dismiss her the next morning without so much as a crusty-lipped kiss. I promised to call, but we all knew better and she left not sure where she stood after a night of vigorous sex. It would be clear soon enough. She would call. The boys would say I wasn't home. She would say I saw his car. The boys would again say I wasn't home. Maybe you should try later. Like I said, they were good men.

By the time I got home from my last Navigation class, Haas and Jarski were already gone. Armstrong told me that

Haas had driven up to Cape Cod to go sailing with his fiancé's family. Jarski had caught the train to New York City where he was meeting up with a Columbia grad student he had once taken to the Blue and Gray. Armstrong stayed, only because he had plans with two Salve tramps. The two girls lured Armstrong by intimating the possibility of a threesome. He said he felt bad about not making it a double date. He truly seemed in a bind, after all, his wingman status might be scrutinized, but I understood, those situations don't come along very often.

"Let a brother tuck this under my belt then maybe, you know, I'll have them hook you up."

"That's very considerate of you, Armstrong," I said rather quickly, which Armstrong took for a dismissal. The two sentiments amounted to the same.

"But bruh, you haven't even seen these hoze yet."

"You go right ahead, Armstrong."

A dark cloud crossed Armstrong's face after my sarcastic reply, but I ignored it. I knew all too well the kind of women Armstrong brought home. Armstrong was a dark-skinned brother from rural Georgia who never let anyone forget that he was a dark-skinned brother from rural Georgia. He wore that badge just as surely as he wore his dated high top fade. Armstrong had his first sip of white girls late in Plebe year (according to Haas and Jarski) and hadn't quenched his thirst for them since. It goes without saying that I had been with a few white girls before—they appear on every brother's resume—but they were not actual relationships. For me, they occupied the margins. I considered these affairs to be short spatial coincidences, a black man and a white woman who happened to have occupied the same space at the same moment. These incidents usually while walking back to the dorms and involved a turn of the mundane conversation. "I've got this wonderful book on aesthetics and I really want you to have it. Give me a minute to look for it..."

Unlike black girls, they didn't talk afterwards. You could walk right past them in the sunny light of the quadrangle, especially sorority girls. I had been to the bars with Armstrong and saw how he lusted, often indiscriminately, after white women. I hid my distaste. I hoped he would cool his white girl fervor before he entered the fleet. But then, what was Armstrong without a white girl on his arm? That would be like a Q-Tip lyric without the zany cultural reference (Industry rule number four thousand eighty/record company people are shady). Armstrong managed a few moments of uncomfortable silence before he spoke again.

"You don't approve, do you?" Was Armstrong referring to white girls or the ménage? I assumed he was referring to white girls.

"It's simply a matter of personal taste," I said quickly.

"It's deeper than that, Lion."

I nodded in sympathy, hoping that he wouldn't give me the details, but sometimes people have a way of pouring problems onto you. Armstrong continued: "I used to think something was wrong with me, like them homosexuals, so I started seeing this therapist in Annapolis. I know what you thinking. Motherfucking Armstrong on the couch? Well Dr. Abromavich was good. Real professional. She figured out that every time I did what I did, I was trying to spite my Moms and my Aunts and them who had raised me. I'm a classic Mama's boy as you can probably tell." In fact I could tell his type a mile away. I had assumed that Armstrong liked white girls because they catered to his whims and called it 'overcoming cultural differences'.

"Are you saying that you cannot see black women in romantic terms-excuse the pop psychology-because you resent them centering their hopes and aspirations upon you?"

"Let me tell you something, Lion. There was eight of us living in a five room shack, bruh. Den, kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms. One bedroom for Mama. One bedroom for the



rest of us. I seen my sisters naked so many times it don't make no sense. Seen periods. Seen titties hanging all out. Ass jiggling back and forth. My one sister Emma used to let this nigga hit it right in front of me when I was a little bruh. I could smell it when he was hitting it. Can you believe what effect that can have on a little bruh? Smelling some nigga hitting one of your sisters?"

"That's why you prefer Caucasian women?"

"That's why I love me some white girls. Boy, I'll tell a sister in a minute get that white girls attention for me."

"Armstrong, you have just become very empathetic."

"I got some issues, bruh." I thought for a moment. Maybe there was an alternative for Armstrong.

"Ever consider a happy medium?" I asked.

"Like a mixed girl?"

"Biracial. Asian. Hispanic. Whatever. Any woman of color who doesn't remind you of home."

Armstrong seemed to consider it for a moment, and then dismissed it outright:

"I'm not like you, Lion. I'm just a simple boy from a peanut town in Georgia. I don't go for all that exotic shit. You can get with those high-post sisters 'cause, no disrespect, you a high-post nigga, know what I'm saying? You know what to say. You got them pretty little words for them hoze. Words that, when put together, reveal a code that's like, 'I'm good to go. Now go ahead and give me that pussy.' See, me? I just come out and ask for the pussy. That girl you just had here yesterday? Man, she wouldn't have told me that it was Thursday, you know I'm saying? Now when I'm with a white girl? I don't need no code. They don't try to improve my shit. They like me for me. I'm black and nasty and their parents hate my ass, even if I am the best thing that come to the doorstep in years. But fuck the parents. I'm trying to crack they daughter's ass cause that's just what they want. Ole girl want me to dick 'em down and be myself. What more is there to life than that?"

Armstrong held the remote in his left hand and lightly patted his inseam in the other. Of all the Annapolis boys, Armstrong was by far, the smartest. You wouldn't know it, and this is just how Armstrong wanted it. He enjoyed putting on his Georgia peanut act, because it had served him well at the Academy. An honor graduate and battalion staff member, Armstrong's natural talent, smarts and leadership was unthreatening and appealing. He was a young man who would probably never panic in his life.

Armstrong continued to reposition. Of course, I didn't want to argue with Armstrong after he mentioned the smell of his sister, but there was much more to life than that. Much more. I also wanted to tell him the truth about me being "high post". The fact is, I wasn't. People just assumed those kinds of things and, admittedly, I don't aggressively correct those assumptions.

The phone rang and Armstrong picked it up. "May I ask who's calling?" he asked, but the person on the other line must have given him a smart reply. As Armstrong handed me the phone, a pissy look momentarily gripped his face.

"Hello?"

"Lion P. Shuttlecock." I knew that voice all too well. Years of classical conservatory training had honed it into a fine instrument. You could hear her whisper across a football field.

"M. Nicole Mansur."

"Did I surprise you?"

"How did you get this number?"

"When a girl needs a date to a wedding in Martha's Vineyard, she's willing to do just about anything." I put up as much resistance as I could muster.

She went on about how she would pay for the hotel. Dinner would be taken care of. Sailing and tennis with Daddy Mansur, Mr. Black Corporate Playalistic himself. All I had to do was catch the ferry, be a good date, and be nice to her family and friends.

"What about your boyfriend?" I asked, referring to Max Vervay, an old classmate she had begun dating shortly after me. Or had she been dating me and seeing him? You never knew with Nicole. She was slutty, but I didn't really care.

"My parents aren't ready for that kind of shock yet. Plus Daddy respects you and Dr. Beatrice adores you. They ask about you all the time."

"Then maybe you should tell them what happened between us." Armstrong looked confused. I mouthed "Nicole" and he nodded in understanding. Nicole still hadn't said anything. She knew I was holding out for a more substantial offer.

"If you act right, I might give you some." Nicole said those words softly, but they sent a surge of energy right through me. This woman nearly paralyzed me, but I knew exactly what to do in preparation for wedding.

"The barber shop closes in an hour. If you want me to look as respectable as your parents think I am, I'd better get going."

"Is that a yes?" she asked.

"Indubitably."

There were two barber shops on Aquidneck. In accordance with convenience, I patronized both until I witnessed an incident at the Coddington Highway shop that assured my patronage. A youthful fellow full of new bravado and a wad of cash in a thick rubber band, offered my barber fifty dollars to cut a series of gang symbols in his head and Ed, my barber that is, refused. He hadn't objected to the gang symbolism; he objected on aesthetic grounds. The haircut would have been an artistic abomination.

"You are not worth my reputation," I remember Ed saying.

"Nigga, I ain't ax about your reputation. I ax about a cut," the customer responded. He began to up the ante. A hundred. Hundred fifty. Two hundred. C'mon dawg. Barber and customer were at a standstill. The young fellow talked loudly on a cell phone. I smiled. Even the ranks of drug

dealers were filled with the nouveau riche. My barber deenergized a set of clippers and placed them upon a white towel. He picked up a crossword puzzle and pecked at with a ballpoint pen. Even his most loyal customers began to fidget. The young fellow discussed his new rims as he talked on the phone. The man next to me up and left. "Got a meeting," he said. That was enough.

Ed unclasped the white sheet, calling out, "Next," while the fellow was still in the chair. After the boy was gone, Ed simply said, "Young fools make old fools." I had adored him thereafter.

The shop was normally manned by two barbers, but this busy Friday evening, only Ed was working. He had probably fired the younger sidekick, a likable barber, who nonetheless chatted too much on this cellular phone and often took brief walks outside to sell eighths of marijuana. Like many barbers, Ed had several talents. He sang vocals for a five piece jazz ensemble, and was known as combative and dictatorial grill man who held dinner parties every Memorial Day weekend. On Tuesdays (my day of hair reckoning because I didn't like waiting on weekends) he would tell me his take at the reservation, but that information was unverifiable; gamblers, like CEO's, only like to report winnings. He had never admitted losing. I looked inside and was immediately disappointed. A long line of weekend men, mothers, and boys had taken up the entire row of seats. Somehow, going to the barber shop on Friday had always seemed in poor taste; my mother, arch-defender of all that was respectable, once told me that men who get their haircut on Friday were frivolous men. Serious men got their haircut for the weekdays. Saturday might be the exception, but only if one were going to church the next day.

I looked in the mirror. I couldn't wait another weekend. Two and half weeks of compacting my miniature afro was too much, and now the my hair was in full scale Frederick Douglass nappy headed revolt. It bolted out of the

sides of my ballcap. A nearsighted Oriole fan might take me for Eddie Murray in civilian clothes.

A chair opened up and I squeezed next to a boisterous, khaki-colored boy who had long bow-shaped eyelashes. He slid down in his seat, to the point where the back of his head touched the edge of the chair. Upon his mother's orders, he then picked himself back up, only to slide down once more, ignoring his mother's strident orders to sit up in his seat.

The boy escaped his mother's grasp, and raced back and forth along the length of the shop. He ignored his mother's orders, laughing, his front two teeth missing. When his mother got up to chase him, ran around empty chairs, bumping the legs of a customer. I could feel the tone of the shop change from this little boy is cute to that boy need a good whipping. My barber held his mouth together tightly. The mother grabbed the boy angrily and brought him back to the seat. He laughed as if he was being tickled; she looked weary and tired. She was dressed for errands, wore no makeup, and had her light brown curly locks pulled tightly into a working mother's bun. She looked me in the eye as she pulled him back to the seats and I was startled because they were emerald green.

The little cocksucker turned towards me with his gap-toothed smile and began kicking my chair with increasing strength. The mother issued another empty threat.

"Is he bothering you?" she finally asked.

"Not at all. He's really cute." Yeah. He's so cute and he'll really appreciate that ten years from now when he's in jail.

"He terrorizes people every time we go out."

"He's just showing off because he knows you don't want to give him a whipping in front of all these people."

"Maybe I should."

"Maybe."

She began to fidget. She looked around, then settled in my direction.

"I'm sorry sir, but I need a favor. I need to use the bathroom really bad. Do you think maybe you could you keep an eye on Lamar?"

Maybe you shouldn't have had unprotected sex when you were fifteen. Maybe his biological father should keep an eye on him, but then again, maybe he's in jail to light a torch for his son. Maybe someone should teach this little bastard how to act around adults. I was beginning to sound like my mother.

"Of course I'll keep an eye on him. Go right ahead."

My barber caught me eye and shook his head and looked away. I looked at the boy, then back at his mother.

"Go right ahead," I said.

Lamar, he must have been about five years old, stood up in the chair and watched his mother walk back towards the bathroom. When she disappeared behind the bathroom door, Lamar immediately jumped of his chair and climbed onto an empty barber chair. This boy was going to get one warning.

"Lamar, I want you to sit down next to me. Lamar. Lamar." He pushed off the counter, launching himself into a spin. The barber chair was his own personal merry-go-round.

"You ain't my daddy," he said while spinning in the chair.

That was enough. I stopped the chair, picked him off the chair, gripping him at the base of the skull and led him back to his chair.

"Don't be touching me. You ain't my daddy. Ow, that hurt."

"Sit your little narrow butt down," I whispered hotly. I saw my barber chuckle. The boy complied pouting and defying me with those big beautiful brown eyes. I kneeled down.

"Listen to me, Lamar. I'm going to tell you this one time. Sit up straight when a grown-up is talking to you. You right, I'm not your daddy, and you can be damn sure-

"You cussed."

"-damn sure that if you were my child, you would be acting right or your butt would be worn out with this." I pulled up my shirt and showed him my thick leather belt. "You can do what you want when your mother gets back, but right now you will act like a man and sit in this chair. You understand?"

"Yeah," Lamar said lazily.

"I'm grown folk, boy. What do you say when talk to grown folk?"

"Yes sir?"

"Okay, let's try it again. Act like a man and sit up in the chair like you got some home training. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

Lamar moped and slid down his chair, but I stared and he sat up again. A customer came up to Lamar and gave him a dollar coin for behaving so well. The boy was so bad I had to prompt him again.

"What do you say?"

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, son," the customer answered back. Now where the hell was that mother of his? As if she had heard me, I heard the toilet flush and water run. She noticed his newfound bearing and smiled at me. She fingered his curly hair. Lamar seemed happy to have been disciplined and have his mother notice. Lamar hugged her as if he had been at camp for a week.

"What did you do?" she said while standing over me. Beneath the loose sweats, I could envision her statuesque form. Her emerald eyes smiled. I looked away, somewhat embarrassed at my audacity.

"I just imagined what my father would have done."

She picked up Lamar and put him on her lap. I saw the corners of her eye. Lamar put his head on her chest and faced away from me. Lamar had three parts alongside the left side of his hair, and a long braid of hair, a kind of tail

about three inches long, a string of pure vanity that grew from the base of his skull. Suddenly, I was afraid for Lamar's future. I saw Lamar buttressed by women who told him he was cute; who told him that he could do whatever he wanted; who were bent on his destruction. I saw with a vision of the future so clear that that I could speak of Lamar in the past tense. She looked up at me and I accidentally spoke. Lamar was in the chair, the barber's clippers at the ready, when I put my hand on the girl's thigh. The thigh felt hot and seemed to twitch, like holding down a rabbit. I needed to know something.

"Can I make a suggestion?"

## Six

*Nicole*

Outside, a morning chill had gathered as frost on my car windows as I drove to New Bedford, the old prosperous whaling town where Frederick Douglass made his oratorical debut. I laughed, remembering an incident at Scaife. A literature professor had handed out Xeroxed copies of the famous speech then turned to write on the blackboard. She heard juvenile snickers and was ready to unleash critical



invective. She was startled to see only the black students bowled over in their seats, holding their mouths trying to suppress laughter. What exactly has gotten into you all, she had asked. She looked at the handout and knew at once: Douglass' wild explosion of nappy, woolen fury and his furious scowl. It was all too much for us fair, luscious, curly-haired Negroes.

I had packed a few days clothing into two bags. Clothes and racquets were in an oversized duffle. Toiletries, camera, and extra items were stuffed into my father's old helmet bag. I parked my old Saab at the Coast Guard station and walked three blocks to the pier. I bought the ferry ticket from an old man inside a ragged ticket booth. He stooped down and winked at me through a small half-octagon opening laced with chicken wire. I stood back and he winked at the passengers behind me, two responsible looking women, both of whom wore extraordinarily large sweaters. I didn't have to see the boat to know it was a diesel. I knew that metallic chugging from my days as a blue shirt working in the engine room. A waft of acrid bluish smoke blew my way. The captain kept the boat in idle while his two deckhands stood on the gunwale sharing a cigarette and surveying the passengers. The deckhands lacked shaves, and though youthful, the slimmer one had gray hairs in the corner of his shaggy goatee. He had the look of tardy wisdom; it might be a year or two before he discovered that it was too late to do anything else.

I looked at the vessel and frowned. The ship was dirty and lacked fundamental qualities of good seamanship. A cleat erupted from the transom. One good pull and it would crack free of the fiberglass hull. Extra line was not faked into a neat coil; instead, lines were thrown against the hull where tourists wouldn't trip over it. A turnbuckle was about to fall apart into a heap of rust. The captain blew his whistle and the young deckhands didn't even bother to flick their cigarettes into the water. The goateed lad leaped over the

transom and undid the line from the large horned cleat on the pier. He tossed the line to- they had the same aquiline nose- his brother? Then he leaped gracefully back on deck. The father (that same nose) was already backing down to clear the stern. The captain throttled forward and we were away in a snap.

The boat was a mess, but the captain was an excellent boathandler. The boys went into the engine room-I suppose to check on the diesel. A thin black man with a thin mustache and a gold tooth, who I hadn't seen until now, came out and fastened a green apron around his waist. Breakfast? he asked quietly. Hot, grilled pancakes, suh? He plopped a fat dollop of butter on the galley griddle and it popped and sizzled alive. The lesbian sweater couple sat up straight. We got links, patties, grits, hashbrowns, and eggs anyway you take'em, any way you want 'em. There were about a dozen passengers and he came to all, courteous and eager to work the grill. Passengers seemed unwilling. The goateed deckhand put his face in the cuddy and yelled out an unintelligible order to the cook and the cook nodded agreeably. Ice was broken. I gave the cook my order and felt like the narrator in Invisible Man as he ate inside a New York diner, trying to distinguish himself from the other country Negroes by ordering unbuttered toast and black coffee. I was far (I thought) beyond impressing white passengers with the modernity of my breakfast order, much less refusing kinship with black cooks. I hadn't eaten that morning or the night before.

Never taking his eyes off the grill, the cook nodded once for each item I ticked off. "Three pancakes. Grits. Toast. Eggs and Canadian bacon if you have some-" and before the cook could ask-"and eggs runny, over easy," I added. The cook grinned tightly, happy to get an unapologetically robust order. The cook scraped and spread the butter about the griddle methodically. Using the bright spatula, he tapped the grill quick and sure like a snare.

A young couple, guided by their noses and dressed in sailing gear they may have bought the day before, came inside the cuddy. The cook looked up and flashed a brilliant, lightning-quick smile. I smiled, too. The cook looked like the bald, black actor from *The Shining*. I couldn't recall the name, but I remembered that wonderful Louis Armstrong voice. The husband walked over and talked to the cook, who never took his eyes off the grill. The wife looked on the conversation hopefully while warming her hands. She wasn't the type to have a conversation with, yes, Scatman. Scatman Crothers was the name. That's what husbands were for. Maybe she was the kind of woman who directed her husband to conduct all potentially embarrassing conversations. How would she react if Scatman looked over her body and flicked a tongue over his lips while she asked for toast and egg whites? But perhaps Scatman was uncomfortable talking to wives while the husband stood off grinning like an idiot. Maybe the cook was like a Hemingway character. Hunters, barbers, grill cooks, and hitmen. Men who talked frankly only to other men.

The cook nodded his head aggressively and broke out another egg carton. The husband went back to his wife and they both seemed pleased with the outcome of his conversation with the cook. More day-trippers entered for the smell of breakfast and soon, the entire room was buzzing with friendliness as the boat made a course to steer for Martha's Vineyard.

Seated to my left, a young man grinned excessively. He hadn't ordered breakfast. He wore a set of dark jeans with sharp creases all the way up the thigh and a strawberry and cream polo shirt. He was about twenty, but the snappish newness of his clothes reminded me of grade school in late August. I simply could not figure him out. Then it hit me. He was dressed as if it were first day of school.

The young man asked me for the time and five minutes later he asked again, even though there was a large

chronometer facing us on the bulkhead. Actually, it probably wasn't a real chronometer; I'm sure it was battery powered. Five minutes later, the young man asked again, and I guess it was the mother who told him to stop bothering that nice young man, but when I looked at him he couldn't stop grinning. It finally occurred to me; the boy was retarded.

Maybe he thought I was just like him. Retarded people don't realize they're retarded. The mother wiped a large wet booger from his nostril's edge and the man seized up and began giggling uncontrollably. He didn't stop grinning when I looked at him. I laughed again and he grinned mightily; we were having a fine time. The boy began to finger the embroidery on my helmet flight bag, or rather, my father's old helmet bag. The mother pulled his hand away, but I said he was fine.

"He saw the gold wings. He loves anything about airplanes," the mother said while continuing to pull at her son's hand.

"No really, it's okay," I said again.

"It seems so authentic," the mother added, now touching the embroidered wings and my father's call sign, "Lion", stitched in cursive below the wings.

"I bought it at an estate sale." This was a lie I told when I didn't feel like getting into an extended conversation.

"Oh," the woman said, still fingering the stitching.

My mother let me borrow it my freshman year. In addition to call sign and wings, my father's name and squadron were stitched on the pockets. Since my parents had never married, it was one of the few tangible items of his that I owned. I've been using it as a shaving and ditty bag and haven't given it back since.

I let the boy play with the bag as I thought about Lill, the single mother I met at the barber shop. I asked Lill to let me pay for her son's haircut, a nice haircut, I wanted to say, that wouldn't peg him as a future Rodney

King. She let me pay, and Ed carved Lamar into a perfect little gentlemen. He was a new boy with a new attitude.

Before mother and child left the shop, Lill wrote down her phone number and pressed it into my hands. I wondered what Nicole would think of this girl Lill. She wouldn't consider Lill proper competition. In fact, Nicole didn't bother to think of other women as competition, so sure she was of herself.

My intense feelings for Nicole hadn't abated. She had dated perhaps a dozen boys before she discovered me during junior year. I did things I'll never do again. I left poems on her windshield. I brought Nicole fresh salads between shows. I told her I loved her the moment I felt it. Nicole knew I hadn't flushed her taste from my mouth. And here she was, the audacity to call me as if there was nothing had happened, asking me to spend the weekend. Using me. I imagined Nicole on the other end of the line, curled up on the couch, twirling the phone cord around her hands, honey-voiced, occasionally looking up to see what was on television, completely aware of the personal hell she was putting me through, but not caring a bit. I told the boys about the Nicole situation and Haas, God bless him, sank his heavy figure in the armchair, sighed patiently, and looked directly at me.

"Women", Haas intoned, as if speaking for all of the Annapolis boys "want to be lied to." He looked at me, smiling at the confusion on my face that would soon be cleared. Haas continued. "It's imperative that you put much more heart and feeling into a lie than you would ever put into something as banal as the truth. You didn't lose that girl when you told her you loved her. You lost that girl when you told her that you loved her and meant it. Its end was ordained the moment those words escaped your mouth." Good ole Haas. Haas had lit a match in a cave full of ancient drawings.

I met Nicole a few days after I wrote a review of a studio play she was starring in. She threw sixteen ounces of Iron City Light in my face, an act of martyrdom that enlarged a growing reputation for prickly diva-like behavior. We were at a house party. Nicole was directly in front of me in the keg line. She glanced behind, pretended not to see me, filled up her red plastic cup and dumped its contents, slowly, on my head.

At the time, I was the theater and film critic for Scaife's trailing student newspaper. I reviewed a studio theater production of Hedda Gabbler. The audience gave the cast a standing ovation, but the outcome was as rigged as laughter on a sitcom set. The audience, full of dramat underclassmen, always gave each other standing ovations. I knew better and proceeded to write it. As I walked out of the production, snow fell from the bright night sky. I felt invigorated. I finished writing the review that very night, and it was in the papers the following day.

As I blew beer out of my nasal passages, I thought I had been unfairly harsh and an apology nearly came from my lips. In the production, Nicole was competent, but she made the amateur's mistake of always acting. Every gesture, every line of dialogue, was full of dramatic import. I almost cried out for her to throw some away. I said as much in the review, albeit with a lighter touch.

She has since changed. I saw her recently, in an Americanized adaptation of Uncle Vanya that takes place in Prince George County, of all places. I sat so far back there was no way Nicole could have seen me. The production was audacious and Nicole had been brilliant. It wouldn't be long before she was plying her trade on the soaps, and then graduate to one-hour primetime dramas as a young pediatrician, passionate high school teacher, opposing counsel, or fierce child welfare specialist.

Nicole said something as she passed me, but beer had clogged my ears. Like a puppy enthralled with its own abuse,

I followed her, despite the fact that I was with a girl that night, a French major named Jocelyn. Jocelyn was a nice young lady from Shaker Heights. She was fond of holding hands, ice cream on Fridays, and the missionary position. She didn't stand a puncher's chance.

I followed Nicole around the party until she stuck her tongue down the throat of the luckiest white boy in the room. She grabbed his beer and tossed it, dousing a throng of partygoers on the makeshift dance floor.

I went to the last Hedda Gabler show. I was surprised to note that the show was still being overacted. I stopped her outside the backstage door. I told her that the play hadn't gotten any better. I told her that she could throw as much beer on me as she wanted, but the review still stood.

"I know," she said. "Why do you think I was so upset?"

I put my hand out. "Lion."

"Lion, do you know we burned that review in effigy?"

"You burn people in effigy, not reviews."

"You really are a critic. The cast and crew are going out tonight. Maybe you can tell me how you got that stupid name." She murmured, laughing at my name, "Lion fucking Shuttlecock. Ha. Jesus Christ that's rich."

I joined them that night. I told them stories about my bluejacket days in the Navy. I told them about the three haircut whores, about hating officers (even as I was becoming one), about the smiles game in Phuket bars, about crossing the equator along with a hundred other naked pollywogs on the deck of a ship. They squirmed as I told them how the shellbacks hosed us down with seventy five pound salt water on our genitals, made us dive through rotting food and garbage, then made us eat a maraschino cherry out of a fat Boatswain's greasy navel.

At first, I thought Nicole's friends liked my stories, but actors are far too self-absorbed and ravenous to listen without self-interest. After I told them about King Neptune's court, which consisted of six of the ship's most

flamboyant homosexuals, a sweet boy named David asked me to write the stories down, and maybe give him a call. I nodded, and then Nicole pulled me aside.

"You think you're tantalizing my friends with your stories, you little Navy boy, but they're only interested if it goes into production," adding, "and these bastards want to create the role and be immortalized." She got close to me and put her finger through my belt loop. "David wants to sleep with you, but that's too bad because you're coming with me tonight." I could see David ordering at the bar, his hips, which showed through tight, nearly white, blue jeans, jutting out like the men I had seen in the public bathroom in Washington Square Park.

As she spoke, Nicole did something much more meaningful with her hands. She created a gesture for the ages. Nicole articulated her fingers and began to scratch the back of my neck, just above the hairline, rotating her fingers in a moving sine wave, so that I felt constant press of her nails. The nails on my neck made me dizzy with lust. She began to build a language of semaphore by combining this gesture with another, such that I could interpret her lovemaking mood. Nicole might open her eyes wide then close them into narrow slits, like the rapid opening and closing of a camera's aperture. That meant she wanted to do nasty things to me and expected the same treatment. If she combined the gesture while placing her hand on my chest, that meant she wanted tenderness, maybe not even sex at all. If she did it while we were in church, that meant Nicole felt Christ's spirit move within her, felt the pureness of Magdalene within. Sometimes she scratched my neck and looked out distantly, her eyes glazed over, and I never found out what that meant. There were dozens of variations.

Nicole kissed me on the nose and led me to the bar. I ordered us drinks and waited for the bartender to bring my change, when suddenly, I felt a sudden heat on the side of



my face. It felt someone uncloaked a large heating element and directed it towards my ear.

I looked over. The director sat at the far end of the bar. He was staring through his thick black frames, the kind of eyeglass frames that had been popularized in the 50s by segregationist governors and teenage idols, but were enjoying a resurgence among graduate students—those who wished to be taken seriously. Perhaps he had once felt Nicole's fingernails on his neck. I saw him look across the room in Nicole's direction several times. He had probably been sleeping with her since rehearsals.

Nicole began scratching my neck again, then thinly asked me to drive her to the store for a pack of cigarettes. I understood the story. As we were leaving, the director pulled her by the crook of the arm and asked where she was headed. She gave him a blistering, withering look. I had seen that look on the night she tossed beer in my face.

"I'm going out for cigarettes," Nicole responded. The director slid one out from a pack and offered it to her.

"I don't smoke those kind," she had said coldly.

"But I got these from you," he had begged. Nicole pulled me by the arm. The director was crestfallen, but Nicole had already moved on.

M. Nicole Mansur (she had initialized her first name by the second semester of Freshman year and even now she won't tell me what it stands for) was a fan of the hurricane lovemaking session. If the room wasn't trashed than the sex was not good. There were smashed light bulbs and desk lamps. Theory was disregarded, on similar terms with empty milk cartons. She buried her face in Derrida, Foucault, and a Chekhov manuscript while being taken from behind. Then tossing them off to make room for another position. Broken fans and damaged headboards. Smudged windowsills. Bedsheets stuffed beneath the door, if not tied around my neck. She bit me on the face and shoulders. She tried shoving her dirty fingers up my asshole. She hit me in the back of the

head with a hardback copy of "Beloved" and I passed out. I woke a few minutes later, watching a tributary of light brown scalp running through long dark, curly hair. She had felled me back to consciousness.

After a few weeks of Nicole, one of my professors, the esteemed novelist Henry Milius, pulled me aside, and asked me if I was pledging at a fraternity.

"No, why do you ask?"

"Look at your cheek, it looks broken. And the marks on your neck."

"I guess I hadn't noticed."

"Are you getting into brouhahas?"

"No."

"The ROTC boys roughhousing you?"

"Heavens, no."

"Well something has been going on for the last few weeks. Your scholarship is suffering, Lion. Badly, I might add. I suggest you rethink the direction of your personal life." And then he got a little parental, adding, "Am I understood?" The only proper response is, "Yes, sir."

The next afternoon as I was preparing for uniform inspection, Nicole's feet tipped over a canister of brass buttons for my summer dress whites. I chased down the buttons, placing them in a clean coffee cup. I looked at the time. Thirty minutes before formation. Each brass button had to be painstakingly fastened to the uniform jacket, the gilded eagle with wings spread had to be right side up. If the eagle's head pointed down, you were gigged for having a "dead eagle". Of course, when I told Nicole about dead eagles, buttons, formations, and their importance in maintaining my scholarship, she grabbed the coffee cup and tossed the buttons out of her second floor window. The buttons sounded like hollow coins, spilling and rattling on the sidewalk. Some went out into the street, others underneath parked cars.

"You can run along and fetch those buttons," Nicole said pulling off her thin top, revealing honey brown flesh and giving the room a fresh burst of pears, "or you can stay here and fuck me until I come." She climbed onto the couch in the kneeling position and began to massage herself. "It's up to you," she added gently, the side of her face pressed against the armrest.

I was on probation at the time. I had been to a military review board to discuss my plummeting performance. The board, consisting of staff officers, had been grave and starkly professional. I nodded at every violation listed. I offered no excuses and took full responsibility. That was the response the board desired, and so they offered me one more chance. Screw it up and my scholarship would be yanked. I would have to pay full tuition myself. At that moment, any wise man would have come to his senses.

Weeping, I took off the uniform and plunged into Nicole. Nicole took me in with grinding awkwardness in her hips. Her moisture eased us into a tender cadence. There was no hurricane this time. Nicole did not spark pyrotechnics. We began slow and ended slow. It was the first time I've ever wanted to cry while entangled with another woman.

I woke to a gaggle of schoolboys walking home from school. I looked out the window. The boys wore fedoras and frumpy black suits, their sideburns twisting down like vines. Orthodox schoolchildren walking home from the synagogue. They seemed dressed for a Raymond Chandler novel, yet frolicked up the sidewalk the same as any other kids.

Behind me, I heard the snap and sizzle of a match.

"What is it?" Nicole asked. She drew on a cigarette.

"Kids."

She joined me at the open window. We were both completely nude.

"Oh my God, they're so cute! I love those sideburns." Nicole turned towards me, laughed, then turned back towards the boys, and I knew at once that I was in love. Her bronze

skin glistened in the reddish fall light. One of the schoolchildren turned and looked down towards the ground. I could only see the top of his fedora, but something on the sidewalk had caught his eye. He reached down, picked it up, and examined it. It flashed gold in his tiny hand. One of my brass buttons.

The boy looked up and saw us both. His eyes flashed and he broke into a big, guilty grin. Nicole held her cigarette out with her left hand and gave him a tiny wave with the right, smirked at the young boy for what seemed to be an eternity. The boy, who seemed too dumbfounded to wave back, would probably never forget the moment he found a brass button then looked up and saw a beautiful naked bronzed girl smirking down upon him.

"Come on, Micah," one of the other boys called out. Micah turned.

"I found something," Micah answered, holding up the button. He ran to catch up with the others. I saw his fedora between patches of red and brown leaves and then it disappeared. I retrieved an old Pentax manual from my backpack. I advanced the shutter. Nicole pushed the camera away.

"No."

"Please."

"Two words: Vanessa Williams."

"Just your face."

"Give me one good reason to say yes."

"Because I'm in love with you and now I need to take your photograph. When I'm old and miserable, I'll be able to look at this photograph and it will keep me alive another day. Is that good enough?"

She smiled: "Why didn't you say so?"

I lost the scholarship, of course, but I had Nicole. She was the kind of crazy woman I could spend the rest of my life trying to figure out. In the meantime, we never tired of each other. She was energetic and flexible. I was thin-

hipped and willing. When she got call backs for Mary Magdalene in Jesus Christ Superstar, she began to pee a lot. She called me a fucker because she thought I had given her something. We went to the doctor and found out the truth. I begged and begged and begged. I would drop out. She could continue in school.

"Absolutely not," she said firmly. We lasted for a few more months. The child would have been about two by now.

The ferry pulled into a pier near Edgartown. The captain steered her starboard side to, and I looked out for Nicole. I looked the pier up and down and could not find her. She would be easy to spot. Nicole was muscular and thin, and never worked out a day her life. She could be unsettling. My mother said she wanted to sit down after Nicole looked right through her with those big auburn eyes. I saw a friendly looking older brother wave at me. He was with a small Asian man who seemed to be teetering while holding a glass tumbler. Nicole wasn't anywhere to be found. It wasn't quite noon.

I threw my tennis racquet and my bags into the bed of an old Ford pickup. Stan drove while Yoshi rode bitch, though he didn't seem to mind one bit. Yoshi held a large drink in his hand. Every time we hit a bump, the drink spilled out on his hand, and Yoshi would begin licking the drink off his hand. He would lick most of it off, until we hit another bump and the cycle would begin again. Stan had just been passed over to be the first black CEO at a big electronics firm, and he was extraordinarily relieved. "If I had one more picture in Ebony, they would have been calling me Booker T. Goodnegro." Yoshi nodded in agreement, yet it was apparent that he didn't understand a word of what Stan was saying. Yoshi was Stan's Japanese assistant. "We don't pay him nothing and he makes more money for me than the whole damn sales department. All he wants to do is drink and hang around black folks and he's happy."

I introduced myself and Yoshi just smiled and nodded and licked more gin and tonic off of his hand. "You can say anything you want; he don't know a stitch of English, do you, you son of a bitch?"

Yoshi grinned and shook his head wildly. Stan smacked the wheel of the truck with his open palm, roaring with laughter. This could be fun. Stan surveyed my size. He was a large man himself. "You frat?" he asked. He turned the steering wheel and I could see the lower edge of an omega in a keloid strip of raised flesh along his bicep.

"No sir."

"Could have sworn you was frat, but knowing Nicole, it makes sense you're not." He was right. Nicole didn't go for the big man on campus type. Stan told me that he and Mr. Mansur had gone to the same college together in the mid-sixties. They had pledged the same fraternity, and when it could no longer be avoided, had volunteered for flight school to avoid being drafted by the Army. They came back to Martha's Vineyard in the summer whenever they could. The informal reunions outlasted first wives, and in Stan's case, a serious bout with prostate cancer. Stan was thinking about retiring early and maybe taking up the barber's clippers again. It helped put him through school and he just liked being around people anyway. I told him about the incident at the barber shop, but left out the part about my hand on Lill's thigh.

"Shit like that is why I'm gonna get me a shop," Stan said strongly.

As Stan talked, I watched the short, steep, unwelcoming beaches of Oak Bluffs. Stan stopped in front of a small, funky house with a screened in porch. There were four chairs on the porch of various ages and styles. Several porch planks were in full rebellion and before I could even step inside the house, I could hear the raucous roar of laughter and the reflection of a large screen television from inside. Mr. Mansur swung open the screen door. It rapped violently

against the frame of the house, freeing a few strands of peeling paint

"Lion my man," Mr. Mansur yelled out. He was already in tennis whites, a drink in hand. "Where's the weapons?" I pointed at my duffel bag. Mr. Mansur winked. I had forgotten that Mr. Mansur was a natural winker, that is, no matter how many times he winked at you, you still felt special. For a six-foot two man, Mr. Mansur had a rather short and broad torso, supported by long muscular legs and a bulging set of calf muscles, which Nicole told me he was particularly proud of. White tube socks gave them framed his calves the way a turtleneck frames the face.

Mr. Mansur was a natural athlete in graceful decline and an executive who had reached his peak prematurely, and knew it. A sharp sense of humor at times, prickly to be sure, a dickhead who enjoyed his dickhead reputation. I would never want to work for him. I was not sure if he genuinely liked me. Perhaps I was merely a useful hitting partner, a respectable boy who occupied his daughter's time. And lastly, despite an outwardly successful second marriage, Mr. Mansur was a pussy gangster through and through. It was in his bones.

"You want forehead or backhand?" he asked. His eyes were sparkled with the implication of a good time.

"Mr. Mansur. I don't know what Nicole told you, but I haven't played seriously in years." Where was she?

"It doesn't matter. We'll win anyway."

"Win what?" I asked.

"We're playing in the tournament." Mr. Mansur said.

"What tournament?" I asked.

"Annual Father-Sons," Stan said, slapping hands with Mr. Mansur. Mr. Mansur drained his tumbler and swung it down on the rickety porch table, as hard as a domino chip. He checked his watch.

"Lion, you got ten minutes to shit, shower, and shave. Match play starts in fifteen minutes." I had to laugh. Here

was a man who had been out of the military for over thirty years, yet still dropped military bonmots as if they had been gone only thirty days.

I learned that Nicole's brother Alan couldn't make the trip to Martha's Vineyard. Instead, he was vacationing in South Africa with friends from school. The new democratic regime had not only changed the political face of sub-Saharan Africa, but also made it possible for Alan to surf some of the world's largest waves.

We had our first match against Peter Jonathan Chenault, the blue chip CEO, and his oldest son, a youthful corporate lawyer. The elder Chenault obviously took great pride in his middleweight physique, but the younger Chenault had an elegant pot belly and the skinny bird legs found so often in the unathletic bourgeoisie.

After a brief warm up, the elder Chenault won the toss and elected to serve. I got into my position at the net and got my first good look at the famous CEO. Although I had seen Chenault on the cover of Forbes-those startling steel blue eyes (I too had thought they were fake, but they were indeed real), the clear nut-brown complexion, and his patented ramrod stare, the black CEO equivalent of a street thug's ice-cold grill.

A gracious man with a row of strong teeth, Chenault was broad across the chest and had wrists as thick and sturdy as a can of soup. He played the game perfectly for a man his size; he hit hard, flat ground strokes with such pace that I felt as if I was returning tennis balls made of lead. His medium height prevented him from hitting torrid serves, but all the same, his placement and pace easily compensated for lack of speed. I did not think we stood a chance and prepared to apologize to Mr. Mansur, that is, until the younger Chenault served in the third game.

Like a gunning basketball player hauling up a shot from thirty feet out, cursing himself after the ball clanked off the rim, so the younger Chenault profanely chastised himself



as he blasted a missile of a first serve into the net. Jesus, I thought.

"Another inch and we'd get blown out of the water," I said out loud. But Mr. Mansur winked as if to say, just watch this baby brother. Incredibly, Mr. Mansur moved way up in the box and I soon saw why. Chenault served up a softball-arced second serve, and Mr. Mansur feasted on it with great relish. We broke him in four points. This is how the match was played out. Everyone held serve, except for babyfat Chenault with his pitty-pat second serve. Between points, the elder Chenault pleaded with his son to "just get it in," but the younger wanted no parts of this safe strategy.

We won the set, and thus, the match. (Only a set since the tournament had to be completed in a single day.) While shaking hands at the net, Mr. Chenault hesitated as if he had seen me before.

"You look exceedingly familiar, young man, yet I cannot place you. Furthermore, I cannot believe you're the son of such a brutish man," and he nodded his head in Mr. Mansur's direction. Mr. Mansur took it graciously.

"I've been called a lot of things, but a 'brutish man' is a new one on me."

And so the pattern was set, not just in match play, but in the nature of the opposition for the next two rounds. Two more times we were matched against tough, athletic, successful older men and their fair-haired, soft-bellied sons. We won the next two rounds as easily as the first.

Those three victories came so easily that I began to enjoy tennis. I almost forgot to resent Nicole. Nicole knew I hated tennis. She knew why, too. My father was the only black kid in his high school to play tennis. After my father died, my mother forced me to take lessons from the local tennis instructor, who just happened to be the town's leading homosexual. I stopped playing altogether when I left home at seventeen to join the Navy. There, I took up another

sport: boxing. In an odd way, they were similar. One individual matched up against the other. You worked angles. You set the man up. You mix shots. You hit light, then hit hard, keeping your opponent off balance. There was a crucial distinction; poor craftsmanship in boxing could lead to being knocked out. As Blinky used to say while putting me through my paces, "You play basketball. You play tennis. You don't play boxing."

A vodka in his hand and a Coca-Cola in mine, Mr. Mansur and I gathered near the clubhouse, where the draw was handwritten in blue magic marker. I saw the scripted Mansur and Son, rising from the bottom of the draw, meeting and vanquishing the opposition. The sight of it gave rise to a brief press of pride. Though I was a ringer, I felt like family.

"Is that who I think it is?" I asked, referring to the father son combination we were going to play in the final.

"That's them," Mr. Mansur said, referring to the LeMays. "Don't let their appearance fool you. Them boys can play," he noted with gravity. "Two time defending champs. And we don't have to be nice; they're family. Marcellus is marrying my niece, Belinda." Nicole hadn't told me.

"Where is Nicole?" I tried asking nonchalantly.

"Getting antsy, Lion?" Actually, yes. I really, really can't wait to fuck your daughter.

"No sir, just wondering."

"You'll see her this evening. Nicole's with the bridal party. Getting the final fitting. Hair, nails, facials. All that girly shit." I'm going to shake all that shit loose when I hit it from behind.

We heard a pair of gravelly Southern voices.

Augustus "Shug" LeMay, the hair care and cable television magnate, and his son, Marcellus, a television and film executive rambled to the courts from the direction of town. Both men were unassuming, rotund, bullet-headed men, the elder having garnered a reputation of perpetual

underestimation, the younger gathering one for his quiet ruthlessness. The LeMay fortune was made in the 1980s with the advent of the patented, no-lye, "Lustrous LeMay System". A fifty dollar kit that ensured a long-lasting natural dry curl, the system enabled many black teenage girls to become serious contenders for the most elite black sororities, driving the market towards an even pricier kit, the one hundred dollar "LeMay Elite" kit, which was sold only in "up market" boutiques strategically located in Shaker Heights, Bloomfield Hills, Prince George County, Buckhead, et all. This system delivered on the promise of rapid "bone straight" hair growth, thereby obviating the need for expensive weave installation and its costly maintenance.

The LeMays were an interesting pair, their ages undistinguishable outside a radius of ten feet. They were often mistaken for brothers. Both were dark, baldheaded, with broad expressive faces that seemed to carry the humanity and hope of the race, wore their hair short, well trimmed, of even length—the classic Quo Vadis cut. I knew only vague exploits, but Mr. Mansur filled in the details.

Flush with cash after the explosive growth in hair care products in the 1980s, LeMay diversified, purchasing a central Florida cable station. To the derision of television experts, LeMay immediately fired the entire staff and hired his son as general manager. They soon began airing all the programming that BET rejected: explicit and grainy rap videos, shady black power television evangelists under grand jury racketeering charges, and more importantly, soft-core pornography featuring "the sistahs you love to bone," a triad of desperate wenches with stretch-marked aureoli whom I had personally come to adore through two-a-day masturbation rallies. Eight years after buying the company for nine hundred thousand dollars, Dark Star Television was now valued at over 400 million dollars. Although the LeMays were extraordinarily successful, they never got the respect they deserved.

Mr. Mansur immediately met the elder in a full two-armed hug, a cut above the now common brotherman hug (a soul grip with the right hand and embrace with the left). After relaxing from the hug, Mr. Mansur and Mr. LeMay gave each other the grip. Again, fraternity brothers. I shook hands only briefly with Marcellus. I was disappointed; his hand was limp and cold, and Marcellus looked down. I told him my name and his face clicked with the fondness of a man who recalls his first freak. That couldn't be good.

"You and Nicole, right?" This man knew of me?

"We're just friends," I said.

"Ai-ight, then. Yeah, Nicole straight." I nodded, but didn't reply. I did not want him to elaborate about Nicole and I think he sensed my embarrassment. After an awkward moment, Marcellus and I looked to our seniors for the cue to begin play.

As we walked to center court, I could see genuine respect in Mr. Mansur's eyes as he spoke quietly with Mr. LeMay. They continued speaking in low tones, even as the LeMays pulled out a set of mammoth titanium racquets, the neck and head as thick as mythical Russian novels. After warming up for a few strokes, I realized that this match would not be like the others. Despite portly frames, both men were light and springy on their feet. They adjusted easily to my topspin by taking the ball early, returning it with a low flat force.

"'P or 'D'?" Mr. Mansur asked, holding up the butt end of his racquet.

"'P'," Mr. LeMay responded.

"'P' it is. You're service." I hit the third ball over, but Marcellus returned it.

"We'll return serves." Interesting. Mr. Mansur prepared to serve, but paused as the LeMays bowed their head for a brief prayer. I saw the elder LeMays lips move quickly, like the evangelists on his television shows. They popped up on the balls of their feet.

"This is good," Mr. Mansur said holding up a fresh tennis ball.

For most men, alcohol has a deleterious affect on dexterity and coordination, but for Mr. Mansur, pure distilled vodka acted as an elixir. He came out cranking hard, top-spinning, Argentina-style first serves that landed deep in the box, forcing the LeMays into defensive returns that were summarily dismissed by Mansur's crackling half-volleys. We went up 40-0, but the LeMays crept up inside the line and began timing his serve, hitting low returns, one which caught me dead-footed at the net, and two which passed Mr. Mansur on his forehand side. He could only fling his racquet at them. Mr. Mansur gathered some reserve and cracked two hard serves, forcing errors. But the LeMays hit the ball cleanly and the import was clear; a break would come sooner or later. Mr. Mansur's service game was much stronger than my own and he struggled mightily to hold serve.

The stands slowly filled with a rambunctious throng. From the truck bed, Stan and Yoshi hauled out a red cooler brimming with ice. Stan took orders and relayed the order to Yoshi. Yoshi nodded, worked furiously, then handed fresh drinks to Stan, who curtsied on receipt. The stands, now full of friends, roared with approval at every poor shot and double fault. Marcellus tapped the ball rapidly against the service line. He was going to serve to tie to the set at four games apiece.

In the first four games, we chatted across the net like old friends. How are things? I'm so good, I might get arrested out this motherfucka. How's business? Rich and black is so much more fun than rich and white. You been to Houston lately? Don't trust no city with a black Mayor and a black Chief of Police. Did Jackson do your IPO? Watch ya wife around that nigga. And the reply, Jackson and them better watch they wife around me. But the camaraderie

dissipated by the fifth game. A loud unrecognizable chant rose up from the crowd.

Mr. Mansur turned his head, annoyed. Yoshi had tied a red bandana across his forehead. He raced back and forth along the length of grass near the clubhouse, a cocktail raise to the gods, and lead the wedding party in what seemed to be a war cry.

"I told Stan not to bring that crazy Chinese muthafucka." It did not matter that Yoshi was Japanese, not Chinese.

Then I saw her. My eye settled upon her as if she stood alone, contemptuous of herself and the world; the bridal party and wedding guests could have been motes swirling about a single ray of light. Nicole. With big, black oval Jackie Onassis sunglasses. Her skin radiated a fading suntan, reflecting a thousand warm sunsets or the glare of a thousand men staring. Her long flanks glistened as she crossed them. She held her knee with clasped hands. She smiled faintly and with the haughtiness that drove me crazy with desire, she, almost imperceptibly, lifted a hand from her knee and waved it my direction.

"Lion!"

"Yes, sir?"

"What the fuck is you doing? Keep your mind on the game. Now let's break these muthafuckas." As the match went on, Mr. Mansur and I began meeting near mid-court to discuss strategy. Actually, he discussed strategy. If the ball was close, I hit it as hard as I could. We settled back into position, but another war cry went up. His concentration broken, Marcellus circled the service line. Mr. Mansur was thoroughly disgusted. He tapped his racquet against the hard court, sounding out the morse code for contempt. Marcellus waited until the war cries subsided.

"I need a fucking drink," Mr. Mansur said quietly.

I put down my racquet to get his drink and maybe smell his daughter, but Mr. Mansur held his hand out firmly. "I'm

already drunk, Lion. Get back in position," he ordered. I complied, but took one more look at his daughter in her vintage tennis skirt and cream linen shirt, her sleeves rolled up loosely, unbuttoned to her sternum, hinting at the firm rounded breasts beneath.

There she was in the loving flesh that needed to be entered. Let's get this thing over with. Marcellus went back to the service line, tossed the ball in a high backward arc, then hit flat down the line for an ace. I began walking towards the net for the next point, when I heard Mr. Mansur's voice. Mr. Mansur stared at the spot. He looked up.

"Long," he said as if his pronouncement settled the matter.

"Well now wait a minute, Frank. That ball was inside the line."

"The ball was long, Shug."

Mr. LeMay hesitated. Then he gave Mr. Mansur an out. "If you're not sure, then we'll go with first serve."

"We don't need a first serve. The ball was long." Mr. Mansur's confidence began to build around the bad call. Yoshi began another war cry. LeMay pointed to the crowd.

"Look, Frank man, this is supposed to be fun, man."

"Don't be 'Look, Frank man-ing' me, nigga."

LeMay turned to me. His bald, veiny head glistened with indignation and the demand for justice. "Was it out, Lion?" the elder LeMay asked.

"It was--"

Mr. Mansur broke in quickly. "It's not his call." Mr. LeMay ignored him.

"Lion?" LeMay asked again meekly.

"Ain't his call," Mr. Mansur said emphatically. I walked towards Mr. Mansur and whispered to him: "I think that was in by three, four inches." He gave me a death stare, his eyes bloodshot and savage.

"Muthafucka, did I ask you?"

At this point, I had to give Mr. Mansur the benefit of the doubt; he wouldn't have known about my past life. Perhaps he believed that I was like his surfer son, or those soft sons of his friends. He had played in too many tennis tournaments below sunny skies free from clouds of violence. I stared blankly at Mr. Mansur while twirling the racquet like a pizza pie maker, contemplating the repercussions of dashing his brains out to make my point. I could think of no other response more threatening or less threatening than,

"You don't know me."

I hadn't used that tone in a long time. I had used it just about every payday in my Fifth Fleet days, but only occasionally used it at Scaife. Mr. Mansur hadn't been threatened in quite some time so he appeared perplexed, like a school bully who had been unexpectedly invited outside.

"What's going on, Daddy?" Nicole asked. I hadn't seen her approach. She stood on the court with her arms crossed.

Mr. Mansur was stumped, deflated. His daughter was not.

"Dinner's in a couple of hours. We don't have all day, Dad."

"This is the championship, sweetheart."

"Take first serve Mr. LeMay," Nicole ordered. The LeMays beamed. Justice.

"Thank you, sweetie."

The LeMays waved and Nicole waved back. She had cut her hair to shoulder length. Her thin hips had fleshed out a bit. The sun had washed out the rough, repertory East coast edge, leaving her face as sun-kissed and radiant as Athena's. It struck me suddenly: Nicole was a woman. She turned around one last time, smiled in my direction, then winked. I wonder who she had gotten that from.

Mr. Mansur wilted. The LeMays broke us the next game and took home the championship for the third straight year. I began packing my racquets. I said nothing to Mr. Mansur, who said nothing in return. The stands were now empty, the bridal party already gone to prepare for dinner, except for



Nicole. She sat alone on the highest rung of the stands. I walked towards her, but, again, Mr. Mansur called out.

"Hold up, Lion. We need to talk about something important." His knees creaked as he stood. I noticed a slight grimace as his right foot touched down. Mr. Mansur placed his full palm on his hip. A man in full just minutes ago, Mr. Mansur had suddenly aged. He was barely able to carry a jug of water. I took his tennis bag from him.

"They say I got about five more years with this hip, Lion. Then I'll officially be an old man. You can't swagger around town with an artificial hip," he said, limping gingerly to punctuate the point. He looked up and smiled. Nicole hugged her father. Nicole turned in my direction and kissed me on the cheek. "I'm horny," she whispered. Nicole held my neck gently with her left and hooked a finger inside my shorts, tracing a burning path along my sweaty waistline. Jesus please, just give me a few minutes alone. Mr. Mansur coughed.

"You played well, Daddy."

"Would have been good enough to win if you hadn't reversed that call."

"Daddy, I was fifty feet away and I saw that ball was in. Everybody saw it except you."

"You lucky you my daughter. Should have cussed you despite the fact."

"Daddy, you're just a big old bear. You throw irrational temper tantrums just so I will arrive like the becalming princess and soothe you into rationality. When I walked onto the court and you caved into me, that made you look powerful, yet tender. Isn't that right?"

"I suppose so," her father admitted rather quickly. Mr. Mansur kissed Nicole on the cheek, scooting her towards Stan's home. "Go on without us, the bridal party needs you. I'm sure they're organizing a search party this very moment."

"Do you want to talk to Lion alone?"

"Obvious, is it?"

"Yes."

"Well, so what. Go away. I need to talk to Lion man to man." Mr. Mansur patted her on the butt and sent her off.

Now, full of paternal easement, Mr. Mansur put his arm around me and apologized for his behavior. He had never been this close to winning and got a little worked up. He was bullshitting, of course, but I nodded anyway. I accepted his apology, but I told him I'd feel much better if he bought me a drink later that night. He agreed wholeheartedly.

"You know what, Lion?"

"Yes?"

"I love weddings. You know why?"

"Because it's romantic?"

Mr Mansur leaned back at an angle. "Fuck no. I'm the least romantic motherfucker that I know. I love weddings because weddings bring so much pussy in one place. Did you see all that pussy in the stands? A man can barely focus on the job at hand. I know, I know. I have a daughter. I shouldn't talk like that, but the hell with what I should do. I'm not the HNIC because I did what I should do. I'm the HNIC because I do what I have to do. Understand?"

"Sure, I understand."

"I don't think that you do."

"Sure I do. I understand that you tried to cheat the LeMays." He laughed at my innocence.

"Cheat the LeMays? The LeMays don't mean shit to me. Why would I cheat folks who don't mean shit to me? Maybe it was test?"

"If it was a test, then who were you testing?" Mr. Mansur grinned and put his arm around me again.

"You know Lion, I'm a tell you something I usually don't tell men dating my daughter."

"I'm no longer dating your daughter."

"Boy, you know what the fuck I mean. This a wedding, ain't it?"

"Yes sir"

"You here cause Nicole asked, right?"

"Yes sir."

"The world is an amazing place."

"Yes sir."

"God puts you in situations for a reason and you, young man, are here in nigga heaven for a reason. Nicole's a wonderful daughter. She's just like me, except she's a gal." Mr. Mansur looked at me sideways to gather if I got his drift. I made my face pure blankness.

We had arrived near a large, disfigured maple. Stan's place was only half a block away. Mr. Mansur continued haltingly.

"I guess what I mean to say is that Nicole is not the most innocent girl in the world and well, it's probably my fault, but that's neither here nor there. Is this making you uncomfortable, Lion?"

"Not at all." In fact, I was positively enjoying it. The man knew his daughter had a slutty side.

"When she's with you, Lion, she glows. She recaptures her lost innocence. I love her as much as a father can. But I won't be around forever. I guess what I'm saying is, is, that I want to see my daughter happy. I want to see her with a man of integrity. I want to see her with a man that I can respect and trust."

I was not in familiar territory. Was Mr. Mansur trying to give his daughter away? I noticed that he strode with authority. His limp seemed to have dissolved with newfound confidence. Although I knew he had her best interests at heart, Mr. Mansur didn't tell the whole story. We took several steps before he noticed the concerned look on my face.

"I think this conversation is premature, Mr. Mansur. I mean, your daughter and I aren't even together."

Mr. Mansur waved at several passerby before turning to me with frustration marking his face.

"What's wrong with you? Are you dumb and stupid? My daughter is in love with you. How obvious does she have to be? The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

We stood outside Stan's house. I handed him his tennis bag. Mr. Mansur handed me a set of keys.

"What's this?" I asked.

"That's my car"—he pointed to a little black bullet—"and this,"—he handed me a plasticized card with a magnetized strip—"is my hotel room."

I will never understand Mr. Mansur, and for a moment I thought that he was joking, forfeiting the rights to his daughter in some strange ritual.

"The room is over in Edgartown with the white folks, but I'm staying at the house tonight. Hope you put it to good use. I'll see you at dinner." He turned without even looking back. His limp completely gone.

I walked over to the low-slung car and stared at my reflection in the layers of paint and enamel. I clicked the alarm on and off a number of times and watched with satisfaction as its lights opened and closed like a panther waking from a nap. It was easily worth three times as much as my annual salary.

The car, Italian in design, American in title, and implacably black in attitude, low and black that is, gleamed in the low sunlight, its shadow cast against the buckling sidewalks ruined by roots running beneath. Did Mr. Mansur imagine that I would drive this thing alone?

I walked inside, past Stan and Yoshi, who were both passed out in front of the television. I didn't bother asking for Nicole, but simply followed my senses that led me towards her. Above, the wood grunted gently. I bounded the stairs and nearly busted down the door. The room smelled of freshly cut cedar, ginger, hibiscus, and acetone, the manufactured scent of female purity. Nicole had the bathroom door open, her torso and head wrapped in thick towels. She

turned to face me, her features tightening into a fiendish little smirk. I had something in store for her.

"Where are your things?" I asked.

She pointed to a bundle of luggage in the corner. I quickly gathered it up. Out of the corner of my eyes, perched on low pillows, rubbing lotion into long thighs, I saw Pauline and Dulcie, two moist, raven-haired bridesmaids who had been sitting with Nicole at the tennis match. Pauline pulled her towel down for maximum coverage while Dulcie merely smirked. I hadn't registered with them until that moment.

From the bathroom: "Do you guys have another towel?"

I turned and saw Nicole's cousin, Belinda, the bride, clothed only by a small towel wrapped around her torso. Her substantial breasts raised the height of the towel, and as she reached for a hair net on a shelf, I saw a flash of mons. I could see that she took detailed care of her genital aesthetics. It had a soft, brownish-pink blush, like a wedge of red plum meat wrapped in clear plastic. Perhaps it had been gently scrubbed, lathered, rinsed, scrubbed, lathered again, gently shaven, then moisturized into submission. I looked away from the bride's direction as quickly and discreetly as possible.

"Get dressed and meet me outside," I ordered.

Nicole nodded mischievously as I departed. I closed the door, hesitated, then reversed myself. I had been extremely rude, but the effect had been somewhat tempered, mitigated because I had been rude for love. I knocked on the bedroom door and reentered, this time more slowly. With eyes looking straight ahead, I apologized in the most humble, conciliatory tone I could muster, then got out of out of there as fast as I could.

There are few pleasures that can compare to a lively throttle and a beautiful girl that you love, downshifting to take a turn and feeling her nails scribe figure eights in the back of your hand. The stiff, comforting smell and feel

of leather and glancing over to see her hair whip about in the back draft. Where shall we go? It did not matter. Somewhere forbidden. What shall we do at the end of the evening? Fucking, hopefully. We drove on a single lane road towards the sun and cliffs. Dipping hills, speed limit signs rising out of wild growth, the parvenu five-liter engine racing past the occupied forces of rough sand, crooked fences, shrubbery, snobbery, and rough-hewn beauty. We exchanged glances, never words.

We stopped at a vantage point and paid a stiff parking fee to a young brother with locks and a Peter Tosh shirt. After walking down a path towards the surf, we lay down and commingled with the clothed and the nude. I stripped down to my skivvies and Nicole down to a pair of cotton underwear she had worn with the tennis outfit. Her nipples poked out like pencil erasers. There were other women, but Nicole's lean body was like a siren to sailors. A few years ago at a formal ball we attended while I was still a midshipman, I made the mistake of letting Nicole straggle behind a few yards. A Marine captain in full dress uniform stopped me with a grip wrapped around my bicep. Take care of your woman, he said dead in my eye. I shook him loose, then, under my breath, told him to get off my dick.

I waded in the water that was still warm from the Gulf Stream. I swam out a little further where the water grew colder and more refreshing. I felt my balls draw up. I looked up to see two men settle five yards from Nicole, then pull tabs from cans of Budweiser. A middle-aged black man walked towards her and asked her if she knew where the nude beach was. Nicole looked up and made a gesture with her head. A fat, naked German dangled his borscht this way and that. Men looked upon Nicole lasciviously. She was becoming popular. There was really nothing to do. I had learned early that to fight the men who lavished her with attention was not only fruitless, but after a while, devoid of pleasure. It was so much more fun to play.

A boat dropped anchor a few hundred yards from the beach. A couple, sunning out on deck, waved at me. I waved back, then gestured for Nicole to get in. She shook her head. I pulled my underwear off and waved them in the air. The young men with Budweisers let out a rebellious whoop. Nicole stood and cast off her own underwear, ran a few steps in the surf and dove in. Her strokes were clean and brisk as she closed me quickly. I swam away from the beach, towards the boat. About halfway the distance to the boat, Nicole caught up to me. She slowed and we began to match each other stroke for stroke, facing each other on the breath. Her entire body was dark, except for the white shaven ovals of her armpits. In the twilight, the shaved area seemed to glow. The better swimmer by far, she smiled as I tired quickly in the ocean currents. We reached the boat and to my surprise, she continued stroking past. The curious couple looked over the deck edge. They thought they might have company.

We swam another two hundred yards, stroke for stroke, before I stopped in exhaustion. Nicole turned and began swimming a little circle around me. Story of my life, I thought. I heard the start of a motor on the boat and looked back in that direction, and was about to ask Nicole where they were going, but Nicole was gone. The waves no longer lapped at my chest, but were now carrying me aloft. It had darkened considerably and the sun would be setting in few moments.

I dove underwater, submerged in blue opaque dusk, and saw nothing save my circling arms. Below me, the dark blue vortex became dark and shadowless. It was too dark to see for more than a few feet. My heart sank.

Just as I was about to go up for air, there she was, speeding from the bottom like an oil-slickened seal. We met on the surface. She shook her head free of trapped water, and smiled at the little game she played.

"Were you scared?" she asked, getting closer. I took her by the neck and pulled her closer. Her eyes were already red from the salt water. I wiped her nose clean. Between waves of low-lying fog, I could barely see the deserted beach. I looked back at Nicole, staring at the thoughts inside her head.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked. I ignored her, kissed her gently on the side of her mouth. Her neck tightened in my grasp.

"We're going to be late for the dinner," she said.

"Who cares? I didn't come here to eat."

The boat, its navigation lights now illuminated, motored by without a wake. The curious couple waved goodbye. Our ride was gone.

"Come here," I begged.

"We can try," I joked, "but I'd drown on the way back." Nicole gripped me below, felt my flaccidity, and laughed.

"I don't think we have too many options, Lion. This water is colder than you think."

"You give up too easy," I complained, but after a half minute of underwater fondling, she gave up. She began to swim back to the beach, but I held onto her leg.

"If we don't start now, we won't be able to see the beach. Let's go," she insisted, but I wasn't going anywhere. I needed to know something.

"You know what a certain someone told me?"

"What?" she asked, now irritated.

"Do I really make you glow? Do I make you feel innocent again?"

"Who told you that?"

"Your father."

"He likes to make things complicated."

She tried to swim away another time, but I held her again.

"I'll do anything for you, Nicole, because I'm still in love with you."



Nicole wrested free and glided away backwards towards the beach, regarding me coolly, as if I might take hold of her and bring her down spiraling to the ocean floor. And I admit, the murderous thought had indeed crossed my mind. If

"My poor little Lion," she said just above the sound of the surf. One moment I wanted to take her into eternity, and the next, a very different kind of eternity.

Her mouth opened and closed. She said something, but the distance and the sound of the surf muted her voice. I swam towards her, but Nicole turned and swam towards the beach, which was now almost completely engulfed in darkness. I followed her, not even sure I would make it back.

Mr. Mansur had given me confidence, but once I was alone in the water with Nicole, I had lost heart. We were too late for dinner to fool around in the hotel room, but we did take a quick shower together. I scrubbed away the salt deposits that appeared as water damage spread out over her back beginning at her backside. But there was nothing else.

Nicole took over full use of the sink and mirror, forcing me to dress in the bedroom. I quickly unzipped my suit, a khaki, two-button, wool/cotton blend that was perfect for a cool summer evening. I tore away the plastic from my starched shirt and put it on, but when my fingers reached for buttons on the sleeve I found none. The laundry had destroyed the buttons. I opened the closet and felt relieved. Almost a dozen shirts hung from a metal pole.

"Nicole, do you think your Dad will mind if I borrow a shirt?"

Nicole had pulled her hair straight back into a bun at the back of her head. Strands of hair had been glazed and thickened with gel. She wore a wispy yellow dress with spaghetti straps. It was a different look for her. I couldn't decide if the slicked back hair and the dress gave her the sensibility of a tragic Lorcan gypsy or the appeal of starlet from the 1940s.

"He won't even notice," Nicole said as she curled her eyelashes in front of the large mirror.

Mr. Mansur's plain white shirt was a bit large, billowing across my flat middleweight chest. I still hadn't gained a manly weight yet. The real problem had unfolded past my hands—the shirt had French cuffs and I had no cuff links. I checked the closet. All of Mr. Mansur's shirts were the same. I checked the drawers in long low dresser. Nothing. Then I checked the nightstand drawers. Inside, a purple Crown Royal bag sat on top of a sheaf of papers. Bingo. I loosened the bag and the cuff links tumbled out like heavy jewels. I found a pair to my liking, a topaz looking stone framed in sterling silver, then put the rest back into the Crown Royal bag.

When I put the bag back inside the drawer, I noticed that the sheaf of papers were actually a manuscript, that the manuscript was actually a screenplay. The cover page had faint circular stains, as if someone had been using the paper as a coaster for tumblers of ice-cold vodka. The screenplay had been extravagantly entitled, "Clipped Wings: The True Story of the Men in the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Pursuit Squadron...and the Women Who Loved Them."

And then, centered on the page, in large, fancy script:  
A Black History Month Special

"What's so funny?" Nicole asked from the bathroom. Had I laughed out loud?

"Nothing," I said, while easing the drawer shut. "Are you almost ready?"

"Bring me the lotion and I'll be ready."

I retrieved lotion from her garment bag, brought it to Nicole, and quickly went back to drawer. I turned to the second page where the principals were listed, as well as a few notes. Lt Charles Sebold, 23, ebony-skinned, chiseled, rebellious, square-jawed son a famed Atlanta preacher, leaves the seminary to become a Tuskegee Airman and fly P-40 Warhawks in the 99<sup>th</sup>. During the invasion of Italy, Sebold is

just one kill short of becoming an ace, when he falls in love with...the character played by Dorothy Dandridge or Lena Horne? Jesus, I thought, this was straight out of an old white guys version of black central casting.

"Why are you so quiet?" Nicole asked. Of course. She wanted a conversation this very moment.

"Don't you think it's kind of weird that your Dad gave me the keys to this hotel?" That question would merit a long reply.

"Not really I guess. I mean, he probably thinks you'll be too racked with guilt to try-," Nicole continued on. I went back to the script. I read the female lead and a chill ran through me.

...Delilah Doucet, 24, a spirited, independent Red Cross Nurse with a dark secret in her past...she thought she'd never find love again, but instead she crosses racial boundaries and falls for the dashing, charismatic Sebold. Until that love is threatened when Sebold is badly injured in a terrible plane crash.

"Did you hear a word I said?" Nicole asked. I turned. She had her hands on her hips. The appeal of a starlet from the 1940s.

In a terrible twist of fate, Sebold will die from loss of blood unless Doucet reveals her true race by giving blood to her true love...

"Just reading the Bible, you know, I forgot how the Old Testament can be so interesting-I'm sorry, " I lied, closing the drawer shut.

Nicole reached for the dashboard and turned off the obtrusive voice on the radio. I said nothing. I drove the sports car, pushing it to its limits. Nicole held onto the hand straps. Her face was blank -I looked again- no, it was thoughtful. Her face barely betrayed intense concentration. I had seen that expression before, coincidentally, when she asked me to drive her to an audition. Nicole had ordered me

to turn off the radio. She had needed to get inside the character.

For some reason, I felt I had to keep the knowledge of the script to myself. I felt it had repercussions that I wouldn't discover unless I let this thing play out. I looked in Nicole's direction. She faced the lights out on the coast. Her hair was pulled back into a bun. It was one thing for Nicole to read the script, and another thing altogether for Mr. Mansur to read the script. Mr. Mansur wasn't a producer: he was corporate baller. Why was her father reading this script?

She turned the radio back on. We turned towards each other. A quick, fake smile.

"Can I ask you a question about your father?"

"What, about the hotel and car? I guess it is kind of weird. Like he wants you to have a safe place for us to get it on."

"Well, not only that, but your Dad said something interesting. He said I did something for you. Made you glow. Made you innocent. That was the word he used. Innocent. I also got the distinct impression that he wants me to propose."

"To who?" she scoffed. "We're not even together."

"That's what I told your father, but he acted like that fact had no relevance."

"Well, do you want to propose?" Her voice had lowered a devilish octave and she gently squeezed my thigh. "I got this weird feeling while we were swimming. It's the feeling I get when men get too serious." The last time I was serious with Nicole was shortly after I learned she was pregnant.

"I might have, but I wouldn't propose without knowing the answer. Besides, what if you said no? Out there? In the ocean? I wouldn't want to be responsible for my actions."

"That's why the man asks the question in the first place."

"You're mistaken, Nicole." I began to gently move her hand from my thigh. "And don't put your hand on my thigh when you ask me a question. That's coercion." We laughed some more as I took a left, and headed into Oak Bluffs.

Nicole and I walked into the Oyster Bar just in time to see Mr. Mansur chasing Mr. LeMay around the main dining room armed with two large, chicken wings. "Get your black ass back here," Mr. Mansur threatened. "You know you want some of this chicken." Mr. Mansur took an obscene bite and began to chew in a slow, exaggerated manner. Shards of white meat hung loosely from his mouth. "This good chicken Shug, this good chicken."

Mr. LeMay seemed justifiably alarmed at the possibilities of coming anywhere near the greasy chicken. He wore a gorgeous, hand-tailored, cream linen suit, two-toned spectators, and a feather light, blue-banded fedora. He walked away from Mr. Mansur, who was steadily advancing on him. A countering Mr. LeMay reversed direction quickly, like a duck at the county fair or a glass-chinned boxer desperately avoiding a punch, then bumped into a stunned sommelier. A threatening splash of red wine came dangerously close to ruining his rehearsal dinner outfit. Lemay let out an falsetto yelp. "Look what you almost did, nigga?" Mr. LeMay said on the verge of tears.

Mr. Mansur gripped the leg, as one would grip the heavy door handle. "See what happen when you run from this here chicken? Very bad things. This chicken been good to you all your natural black life, and now you want to turn your back on him? This chicken wants some rectification. This chicken wants justice. No justice, no meat. No justice, no meat."

Mr. Mansur continued stalking his prey with quick feints, and now had Mr. LeMay cornered between two adjoining tables and the water and iced-tea station. Like Ali crazed gaze in the months before Liston, Mr. Mansur's eyes were big as saucers as he held the chicken in two tight fists. Mr. Mansur walking ponderously towards his victim. Mr. LeMay

held his fedora in his hands, pleading for mercy. White folks in the dining room were confused; their allegiance wavered from alarm to good humor, then back to alarm, that is, until Nicole called out to her father in another moment of mischief.

"Hey, baby," he responded sweetly. Mr. Mansur noticed that he had the attention of the dining room. "That's my daughter. She an actress." As if that fact sanctioned his chicken antics. Mr. LeMay quickly retreated back to the private room.

The private room was small, but well appointed with a cerulean ceiling, and a stunning series of light fixtures, designed as long stems with light emitted from a sculpted petal shining directly onto the wedding party. There were two dining tables—the first was for the bride and groom, maid of honor and best man, immediate family, and old family friends like Stan. The rest of the wedding party, including Nicole and myself, sat at the free-wheeling "kiddie table." I was seated between Pauline and Dulcie, the raven-haired sisters who were first cousins of the bride. Nicole was seated across the table to the right, sandwiched between Yoshi, who kept staring at her breasts, and the only empty seat.

With his chicken antics, Mr. Mansur had flushed decorum down the toilet. We learned that the incident began because the LeMays, wealthy, powerful, and influential, were still Florida country boys at heart. "I don't care how rich, they still country," Pauline said, pronouncing the word with three syllables. Pauline told us what had precipitated the incident. The LeMays poked at the sushi with long salad forks, then refused the raw oysters outright. Shug instructed the waiter to bring an alternative and continued conversing with his future in-laws. Apparently, the LeMays hadn't bothered to select a specific appetizer. The waiter, just doing his job, brought ginger chicken to the table. People loved the ginger chicken, the waiter begged, but the

LeMays became livid. Dulcie picked up the thread of the story from her sister. I had only glimpsed them earlier, such that they may have been twins, but up close, they were as different as two sisters could be. Their similarities ended with shockingly black hair and thin, Sephardic noses. Dulcie was shorter and plumper, with a lively, intelligent face. "I've never seen a man so black, get so red, so fast in my natural life. Amazing. Shug start cussing that man out. And that's when Mr. Mansur-he so crazy-got into it."

The waiter, still stinging with humiliation, filled our wine glasses while Dulcie continued. Mr. Mansur, who had had enough, grabbed the chicken with his bare hands and began chasing Mr. LeMay around the tables in the private dining room to hysterical laughter. I looked at the grown folks table and saw that Mr. LeMay still seemed to be in a state of fear. His brow was wet. He shot his cuffs and sat down, pulling his chair in and peering down the table at Mr. Mansur. LeMay's eyes were large with fear as he muttered "crazy motherfucker" under his breath.

A waiter slid the door open for a tall, ruffled, preppy white guy. A sly grin broke across his face as he calmly entered the room. A roar went up from the grown folks table. They stood to greet him. The preppy guy maintained his composure. He was glacial, unencumbered, ready for exaltation. One got the impression that he would be more comfortable in a roomful of strange black folks than he would be eating a bowl of cereal in his parents' own kitchen.

"The best man!" Shug exclaimed, leaping to his feet and pulled him in close with a brother-man hug. Shug practically lifted the man off the ground.

The preppy white guy went around the table greeting corporate giants and wives in a familiar, unhurried manner. He spent a few extra moments talking to Mr. Mansur, thanking him, I believe, before sitting down with Nicole. It was an odd seating arrangement for the best man, but what did I

know? I began gauging her reaction and pegging my own mood to hers.

Nicole greeted the white guy with a single kiss on the cheek. She sat up high with perfect posture. Maybe the best man wasn't white, I thought. His skin tone was slightly Mediterranean. I motioned for more wine and onced him over: he wore a loose, wrinkled polo shirt. His oval, tortoise shell glasses pinched his intelligent face. But that scruffy haircut and premature goatee gave him the aura of reckless informality. Indeed, he was not black. Every single person at the table was dressed to the nines, and here was this sharp angular prep just as comfortable as he could be. Even rappers would have retooled their sense of fashion in these environs. The privilege of dressing down settled on his shoulders, and in a few moments, would cease to be noticed.

I felt a tap on my left shoulder. I turned. Dulcie. I immediately recalled seeing her rub lotion into her thighs and that smirk on her face.

"If you wanted to see us naked, you could have just asked nicely." I didn't know Dulcie well enough to recognize if she was joking or not.

"Pardon me?" I asked, feigning innocence. Then I felt a tap on my other shoulder. Pauline.

"The stunt you pulled earlier? You made a terrible first impression."

"I'm really sorry about—" I began to stammer, but before I could get it out, the sisters began laughing. They leaned back in the chairs and laughed with each other, facing each other across my back. Dulcie smacked me on the shoulder.

"At least you weren't one of those old nasty men for a change or that little bastard Yoshi, who's always rubbing up on me."

"How is Stan?"

"Very nice until he gets drunk."

"And Mr. Mansur?"



"Are you kidding me? He's the worst of the lot," Pauline said from my right. "Our Aunty warned us." Where was Mr. Mansur's ex-wife? She probably wasn't ready to be around Mr. Mansur at a social event.

Dulcie from the left: "Why do you think he gave you and Nicole the hotel room?"

"And you think Nicole is strange? Them two are peas in a pod—" Pauline added, trailing off while separating a mussel from its shell. She struggled for moment, then succeeded, but only after spraying a few droplets of butter and olive oil on her blouse.

"Lion darling, will you fetch me an ice cube?" I drained my glass and placed an ice cube inside a table napkin.

She had called me darling, just as Mrs. Mansur once did on that strange visit in her Gentilly parlor.

"So what are you doing with our cousin in that little hotel room?" Dulcie asked slyly. She smiled down at her plate then looked up with tines pressed against her wet lips. Dulcie had a heart-shaped face and sparkling emerald eyes that beckoned like a little finger from across the room. Nicole had told me a little about Dulcie. For most of her life, Dulcie had been overshadowed by her older sister Pauline, who was considered far more beautiful, graceful, and fairer. Dulcie had developed accordingly and had thoroughly eclipsed her sister in all facets, the only exception being the traditional notions of Negro Beauty. In addition to being shorter and heavier than her sister, Dulcie was more approachable, more daring, funnier, and much more likely to sleep with her best friend's boyfriend. She was a gem.

"You know you shouldn't stare at people like that," she said holding the fork upright. "It makes some people uncomfortable."

"But not you?"

"Not me. I like it like that." I knew what she meant, but I let the comment sail by me. After a few more drinks, perhaps I'd respond to that comment. I covered the top of wine glass as the waiter came by. "Gin and tonic," I said, looking at Dulcie.

"We must be boring you." Dulcie added. I shook my head.

"What did Nicole tell you about me?" I asked.

"Nicole likes to be mysterious." Another head toss. "I think she mentioned you being in the Army."

"Navy."

"Are you like a cook or something?" Pauline asked. I felt the flash heat of Dulcie's contempt for her sister's stupidity. Pauline was kind of woman that only heard the sound of her own voice. If I had to sit next to Pauline for the next couple of hours, I would have to do it with the aid of gin. I lifted my finger for the waiter's attention, then responded to Pauline.

"No, I'm not a cook. But there's no shame in being a cook. They do the most important job on the ship."

"Pay no attention to Pauline. She wasn't listening when Nicole told us that you were a pilot," Dulcie said, "like your Dad."

"A pilot!" Pauline said brightly. She twisted her torso, facing me directly.

"My Dad was a pilot. Not me."

"You're not a pilot?" Pauline asked, already in retreat. "Then what exactly are you?"

"I'm one of the guys on the ship, on the bridge, looking out on the sea with binoculars."

"Any women on the ship?" Pauline asked.

"Not one double-ex chromosome."

"So what's it like being surrounded by men all the time?" Dulcie asked, grinning.

"Perhaps Dulcie should tell you what that feels like," Pauline said sharply. Dulcie made a little clawing gesture at her sister, as if she weren't surprised, perhaps even

pleased, by that comment. I wanted to talk to Dulcie, but every time I did, I lost sight of Nicole.

"Is your Dad here?" Pauline blithely asked.

"Uh, no."

"Where does he live?" She continued. I guess Nicole hadn't told her everything.

"My Dad's aircraft was shot down in Vietnam."

Pauline looked crestfallen, as if her dress hadn't been altered in time for the ball. "I'm so sorry," she said, sounding almost apologetic. "Did he--?"

"Yes," I answered before she asked the wrong question. "He's dead." Pauline looked like she was going to cry. "It's okay," I said as the waiter set down my drink. He then took my plate away. "I barely remember him." I drained my gin and tonic in two gulps. The crisp green gin spread through me like a warm tide of goodness. The gin was British countryside in a bottle. Before the waiter could leave, I raised the empty tumbler for another and watched as Nicole continued flirting with the preppy white guy.

Guy whispered knowingly in Nicole's ear. I assumed that had known each other since Shug's college days. She leaned her head back and laughed. Every time she leaned her head back, Yoshi looked down at her breasts, but that didn't bother me at all. The preppy white guy continued to spark her laughter while ignoring Yoshi. Nicole held her hand over her mouth, as if she needed a break from the jokes.

"Who's that?" I asked Dulcie.

"Who, the white boy? That's Guy the white guy. We've been calling him that for years. Guy Glickman. He's cool. Guy and Marcellus were roommates in college."

"What is he? A lawyer or something?"

Dulcie looked upwards, holding still a forkful of sea bass flakes. "Guy? Good Lord, no. He dropped out of college. He's-let me think-he's either a rap mogul or a movie producer."

"He's both. And he's brilliant," Pauline added.

"Pauline would know. She reads all the brilliant magazines. She can tell you all the brilliant people who will change the world as soon as they get funding." I tuned out the feuding sisters and turned my attention to more important things.

Guy ate quickly, gulping water with every mouthful. Nicole held a wine glass daintily to her lips. Her posture, her starlet grace, the way she flung her head back in laughter, it all reminded me of the blocking in a Noel Coward play. The waiter brought me another drink. I tossed it back quickly. I wanted to smash it all to pieces. I could barely taste the alcohol. Keep 'em coming, I told the waiter. Dulcie and Pauline looked at me in amazement.

"Drinks like a sailor," Dulcie said, while squeezing my thighs beneath the table. Nicole touched Guy's hairy forearm as if to punctuate every exchange. After, an especially friendly exchange, Nicole rocked in her seat in laughter. Guy looked up and caught me staring. Then he let me off the hook with a friendly nod. I didn't nod back. He spoke a few words to Nicole who turned and waved hello. The waiter brought me another. I raised it to Nicole and Guy. For a moment, I could not keep Nicole and Guy in focus. It was either Nicole or Guy. Every time, my eyes changed subject, they needed a few seconds to focus. For some reason, it struck me as being funny as hell. Dulcie brushed imaginary flakes from my shoulder and leaned in close.

"Forget about her," Dulcie said in a hushed voice that only I could hear. "She drives every man crazy." I barely paid attention, but the last words Dulcie spoke were like a premonition, as if she were guiding Nicole's hands with her words, I saw Nicole raise her hand. The hand went behind Guy's neck, where I could not see it, but I knew what was happening because Guy's face burst open in pleasure. Nicole was scratching the back of Guy's neck. I remembered how the director looked at us and now I was looking upon Guy and Nicole.

My heart heaved and simultaneously, a tide of gin began to threaten and rumble below. A wave of nausea made threatening sounds deep in the bowels of my stomach. I spread my hand over my face and mouth and clenched my chest tight in a vain attempt to batten down the hatches. The nausea gathered gin, oyster flesh, chunks of blackened lamb, and gastric juices, welling them up inside me, threatening and then battering my throat with the force of a storm. I clenched my body, then jerked spasmodically against the forces of nausea. I had no other choice but to emit a loud foul-smelling belch. Pauline waved a hand in front of her face. She looked disgusted. I heard disembodied voices asking me if I was okay. I felt the tide inside me retreat momentarily to gather more forces. I would not be able to stand another surge, so I ran to the bathroom as fast as I could, feeling the heat of eyes following. I rushed past waiters and that same sommelier who had run into Mr. LeMay. There was no time to lose. I scampered into the bathroom, scuttling on the slippery tiles, and hurled myself at the bowl, curled myself around it, and dry heaved three times. Tears blinded me. I held onto the bowl for strength and guidance. On the forth heave, I heard a deep guttural sound, then orange hued vomit shot out like a geyser, like a goddamn water cannon. It ricocheted off the side of the toilet walls and spread like gunshot. And then again, and again, and again I wretched, each heave decreasing in strength and duration until I was an empty vessel. The last remnants of everything I had eaten lay on the water's surface. Several chunks of oyster floated to the surface, while a few bits of lamb clung to the white ceramic walls. I became nauseous again. I flushed the toilet and sat there disgusted with myself. I felt another surge and held the bowl. I wretched again, but only a few liquid drops of gastrointestinal fluid came up from my stomach. I spit those drops into the bowl and flushed again. The tiles were cool, inviting, but I didn't want someone to see my lying there in

the stall like a drunkard. I sat on the toilet, closed my eyes and rested. I breathed in and felt pure. But with my eyes closed, the world began to tilt and spin. I opened my eyes and world slowed to a stop again.

I heard the bathroom door open and shut. The cadence of hard heels upon tile. I waited for a voice to ask how I was doing, but there was only breathing then a startling, clear blue whistling.

I stood up inside the stall. When I felt myself swaying I extended my arms out like a drunken Samson. Once I felt steady, I opened the stall door.

Guy stood with his hands on his hips. I stood near the door. Had he looked over his left shoulder, Guy would be able to see me, but he was mesmerized by the blood red tiles that covered every bare space in the bathroom. Two stalls pressed against the far wall. On the left there were four urinals separated by stainless steel dividers. Guy had picked the second urinal from the entrance. He was a hands-free pisser. Guy looked down, then back up. He waited. I stood back. We waited in silence. Four recessed light fixtures centered on the stark black urinals beamed down into pools of light.

A chill of *déjà vu* ran through me. Several years earlier, before I worked for Chan, I caught many delinquent sailors during a midnight piss. I took them gently by the ears. Where's my money? I would ask calmly, gently. Somehow tenderness seemed more intimidating. It didn't work all the time. The fuck? I don't owe you a goddamn thang and get your bitch hands...and so forth. A few moments later, broken teeth stuck in a urinal cake and a mouthful of blood congealing inside the tiny little holes. It had been years since I'd had a really good scrap. The thrill of violence began to seep through me and harden.

Before I could bash his teeth against the edge of the urinal, Guy turned towards me.

"Can't believe my best friend is getting married. You married, Lion?"

"No."

"That a no or a fuck no?"

"Plain old no. It's Guy, right?" He nodded.

I chose a urinal and unzipped. I could see Guy in my peripheral vision. He was now in full stream, loudly.

"Man, I heard you was in the service. I tried to join the Marines when I was in high school. My dad was okay with it. Thought it would make me a better man. Not some whining, paralyzed, angst-ridden, Upper West Side intellectual. My dad knew what was up. But my mom, my fucking mom, she went ballistic. She thought I was gonna turn out like her brother." Someone had told me once that Jewish people liked to talk. They also said that Jews assumed they were the most interesting, persecuted people in the world. Or was that black folks? In any case, Guy didn't disappoint. Guy began mimicking his mother's high nasal whine. "'You want to befriend every schwartze in the borough? Fine. You want to listen to that noise? Fine. But you are not going to be some fascist goy storm trooper, not my son. You hear me Guy? You hear me?'" I could almost picture an obese Jewish mother in a frayed housecoat. Guy laughed to himself. "You know any Jewish guys in the service?"

I shook my head.

"Didn't think so. They're too burdened with the problems of the world. That, and choking their uncircumcised chicken, you know what I'm saying? Fucking Norman Podheratz. Fucking Woody Allen. Fucking Phillip Roth. Fucking doctor. Fuck that shit. I'm trying to get paid, you know what I'm saying? Hey Lion, you're in the Army, right?"

"Navy."

"Whatever. I have a production company and our first movie is about this Tuskegee Airman guy. Corny title, but great story. You heard about those guys?"

"They ring a bell," I said, nodding again. He walked behind me and stopped. I looked over my shoulder.

"Shug and I are producing this movie and we're going to need some military advisors. To get the uniforms and the saluting and take 'em through boot camp and all that stuff. Maybe we can hire you as a consultant." I had never met a movie producer, but perhaps this is what they did. They immediately established their sense of largesse by offering proximity to production, glamour, capital. I couldn't help but be a smart ass.

"I'll send my resume."

The heels of his penny loafers clicked against the tiles, echoing in the high, ceiling-ed bathroom. Then, they stopped echoing.

"That would be gr—you just fucking with me, huh?"

"I thought you were too."

"Doesn't matter. I'm in a great fucking mood. Anyway, there's this part in the movie. A girl. And Nicole out there. She's perfect. Anyway, Shug and I have seen just about everybody and we haven't found the right actress. Hey, why am I telling you this. What do you care?"

"No no noooo. I care. What were you about to say?"

"Naw. Don't worry about it." He washed his hands and began drying them with paper towels. Guy looked over with uncertainty.

"So what do you know about Nicole?"

"We went to school together. Nice girl."

"Nice girl?"

"Nice girl," I repeated.

"Uh huh," he said. "What else?"

"I saw her in a few plays." I said.

"That's not what I'm talking about it. Is she dependable? She have any skeletons in her closet? I mean, does that crazy chicken antics that Alvin—"

"Mr. Mansur?"

"Right. That Mr. Mansur does. Does she do it, too?"



"I wouldn't know. I'm the wrong guy to ask." I sensed that Guy knew I was misleading him. He began using his polo shirt to wipe his lenses clean. That same sly smile crossed his face again.

"You two aren't together, are you?"

"No. Why?"

"For obvious reasons, Lion. Unless you know something I don't know."

"What makes you think I'd tell you if I did?"

"Hey bro, I was just getting clearance."

I hated when they called me "bro".

Guy continued: "She ever date a white boy?"

I stared passively back at Guy. He was still cleaning his glasses. This was thrilling. He had practically given me an invitation. Then I thought about it. Maybe this guy could fight. You can't walk around talking to people like that unless you could fight, but then again, these were the people that Guy surrounded himself with. Guy might have been asking me where I had bought my shoes.

"I wouldn't know. I'm not white."

Guy smiled. "That's what I thought you were going to say. I could tell by the way you stared at us. Guy wiped his hands with paper towels and tossed them on the floor. "Tell me something, Lion. I was thinking. Maybe she doesn't date white boys, but fucks them instead?"

I was going to aim for the larynx. Incapacitation without the blood, but smashing his nose would have been much more delightful. The nozzle spray of blood would ruin Mr. Mansur's shirt. I doubt if he'd miss one shirt. He had over a dozen similar shirts in the hotel closet. I contemplated the bloody spray, the number of shirts, and most off all, a soft vulnerable spot on a soft vulnerable man. What's more, I could just say I was drunk. I thought all this while taking sure steps on the tile towards Guy, when the door burst open. It was Shug. He looked irritated. His eyes darted from Guy, to me, then back to Guy.

"We about to do the speeches. You got your speech ready?"

"Sure," Guy said. He lied terribly. Shug pointed at Guy.

"This is the only white guy I know who can keep a roomful of black people waiting. Come on, fool." Shug put his arm around Guy, and pulled him out of the bathroom.

When I returned, Dulcie immediately jumped out of her seat and asked me if I were all right. Before I could answer, Guy tapped a salad knife against an empty wine glass, making a tinny clink that didn't raise a single head. Mr. Mansur grunted and raised a bottle of wine, and Guy responded with a quizzical look on his face. Mr. Mansur and Mr. LeMay, best friends again, snickered until Guy figured out that he needed to pour a little wine in his glass in order to lend more authority to the ring. Guy cleared his throat nervously before taking a large gulp of red wine. Heads turned uncomfortably towards Guy.

"I want to thank Mr. Mansur for flying me in his Gulfstream from Teeterboro. I would have never been able to finish producing my act's new album if it wasn't for Mr. Mansur. I'd also like to thank both families..." Guy droned on, but I had stopped listening. I was simply waiting for a time when I could catch him alone. I held my hand over my mouth and nose and took a deep breath. Lord have mercy! Where was the waiter? I needed a glass of soda to mask the scent of vomit.

Mr. Mansur smiled gravely, as if he had personally paid for Guy's flight, as opposed to the vast oil corporation that surely absorbed all fuel, pilot costs, and landing fees. Mr. Mansur mindlessly began fingering a pair of staid, corporate cuff links.

I heard a few gracious laughs. Perhaps Guy had told a joke.

"For some reason, Shug wanted me to talk to you here. I guess he doesn't want me get long winded tomorrow, so I'll

be long winded today," he said, laughing nervously. I was already shifting uncomfortably in my chair. Pauline began applying a subtle lip-gloss about the shade of cantaloupe rind and checking her teeth. Dulcie filled her glass with wine then made a funny face to her own reflection. She saw that I was looking. She guffawed silently. I almost began feeling sorry for Guy. Almost.

"I've known Sh-Marcellus-Shug since freshman year at Tulane. Can I call you, Shug? That's what, Shug? About ten years? Shug is like the brother I never had. No, he is the brother I've never had. But we started off on a rough patch."

"Like this speech," Dulcie whispered too loudly.

"At the end of our first week as roommates, Marcellus invited me to his church. Of course, like many Jews from the Upper West Side of a certain age, I was going through an ardent stage of agnosticism. I had about as much interest in God as I had in my, hell, there was nothing I was less interested in. And I thought, well, my new roommate is trying to convert me into a Christian. That's downright anti-intellectual. I told my friends about it and they made some disparaging remarks that I'm not proud of. Said he didn't belong here with all that Jesus mumbo jumbo. Said go back to the country with all that. I didn't want anything to do with him. So I gave Marcellus some lame excuse. I told him that I was Jewish. And Marcellus, having never known any Jewish people, asked 'What does that have to do with going to Church?'" That got a few laughs. And the rest of us began to perk up with attention.

"I said, well Marcellus, it means that I don't to 'church'" -Guy put air quotes- "I go to shul on Friday. I said it very slowly, very pretentiously like I'm doing now. Hell, I was from New York.

"Friday comes around and a few of my friends brought over a few eighths of the good green stuff and we proceed to light it up right there in the room. The last thing on my

mind is going to the synagogue. Well, I'm in the middle of a puff, and in walks Shug. This is what he saw. Five very stoned, very white people in his dorm room. Shug looks around real serious. With that shiny forehead, y'all know what I'm talking about."

Guy got more laughs at this. Deeper laughs as we thought about a young, fat ageless Shug looking down upon these stoned white folks. Even I aimed my ear wondering what Shug might do.

"And he asks me to come outside. Well, I think he's gonna beat me up or report me to the Dean of Students. He asked me what was going on and well. I was speechless. Then Marcellus said, 'Man why didn't you tell me you and your friends were going have a Bible study?'"

Both Mr. Mansur and Mr. LeMay nearly fell out of their seat in laughter. Mr. Mansur laughed so hard that his head was in Belinda's lap. Belinda slapped his head playfully, before Guy continued.

"Mr. LeMay, there was a lot of things you didn't talk to Shug about. He may have been naïve about white people smoking marijuana, but he was not naïve about the ladies. Excuse me, Belinda, but Shug had girls calling the room at all hours. And let's be honest, Shug is no Billie Dee Williams." Guests at both tables slapped at their thighs and shook their head in agreement. Belinda kissed her future husband on the top of his head, as if to say, baby I loves you just the same.

"No Lord, everybody can't be no Billy Dee," Mrs. LeMay said out of nowhere, startling every guest. Her face was dark, ashen, and frankly, simian. I hadn't even noticed her until now. I scrutinized her features and compared them to Shug. If anyone looked more like more like Shug than his father, it was his terribly ugly mother. Mrs. LeMay had heard something in Guy's speech that made her want to call out in response.

"Shug had something else," Guy said.

"Malt Liquor?" Mr. Mansur said, breaking up in hysterics, but Guy was on a roll and didn't miss a beat.

"He had charisma. Pretty soon, he started holding little Bible studies in our room. And let me tell you."

"What now?" someone called out. We were now Guy's congregation. He was our revival preacher. Guy's voice began to thrum with the beat of spiritual authority. Nicole clapped her hands together. We extended Guy the latitude and goodwill of the friendly outsider.

"I have never seen..."

"Yes Lord?"

"So many..."

"Uh huh."

"...beautiful women..."

"God hate ugly."

"...sweet, gorgeous creatures..."

"But He sure love pretty."

"...in my entire life."

"Uh huh."

"And I made the decision right there."

"A mighty decision. A submissive decision."

"To stop smoking weed."

"The Lord sure changes you."

"In the dorm."

"You got to start small, Lord."

"I saw them beautiful co-eds from Xavier and started to rethink my Upper West Side ways. I had all the knowledge, a little of the heart, and none of the girls. What kind of ways is that there?"

"Say what?"

"Shug had a little of the knowledge, a lot of the heart, and all of the girls. I looked at myself. Then I looked at Shug. I said to myself. Self, I said, you don't know as much as you think you know."

"Self revelation!"

"I wanted to be like Shug."

"Oh heavenly ironies."

"You know what they start calling Shug?"

"What's that?"

"The Hugh Hefner of Bible studies."

"Go on, now."

"The Hefner of Bible studies. That's what they started calling him."

"Go head, now."

"They came in all shapes and sizes. The most beautiful girls in New Orleans crammed into my room. Talking about what Jesus means to them. It was very strange and mysterious."

"That's how He work sometime."

"So one Friday, I told my friends that I had to study."

"Don't study war no more."

"What I didn't tell my reefer-smoking friends was that I was going to study the bible."

"Lord have mercy."

"I have entered this world, and I'll never go back."

"That's what they say."

"I said I'll never go back."

"Somebody get me a drink of ice water. This white boy is getting me heated up."

"Well, one evening after Bible study, Shug and I are at the Trolley Stop Cafe having some hot chocolate. Shug don't like coffee. Shug axed-" Did Guy just pronounced asked as axed? "-if I remembered this girl from the bible study. He said she had a knee length denim skirt and a red sleeveless top. She wore a pair of brown suede boots that came up to meet her lower thigh just so. Unlike the other girls, with their long wavy, good hair-" Guy spit the word out with so much force that it startled me. "-this one had short, curly, wild hair, and this wonderful throaty laugh, that you could hear from the hallway. And I said of course I remembered her. I was staring at that denim skirt and listening to that throaty laugh all night long wishing I was the one was

making her laugh. And Shug said he saw me staring. And I told Shug that I didn't care that he saw me staring, that was my intention the entire time. And Shug said 'You better stop looking at her.' And I said, 'Why I got to stop looking, Shug?' And Shug said, 'None of your business why.' Then I asked him one more time. Then Shug said he was gone be forced to go upside my head if I continued my evil, staring ways. And I said, 'To hell with you, Shug. How come my ways is evil and yours is so innocent? Tell me this, mister man?' I will never forget what Shug said. He was serious as a heart attack. Cause one day, Shug said, I intends to make the gal with that throaty laugh my wife." Guy ended his speech abruptly, perfectly, and began to make his way to the kiddie table.

I had heard that throaty laugh throughout the course of his speech, but now Belinda was not laughing. In the silence of slow comprehension, I heard her muffled gasp. Her hands were in her face, fingers pushing against the nose in a vain attempt to stem the tears of joy.

Guy tried to calmly make his way to his seat, but it was impossible. He was mobbed. I looked at Nicole, that beautiful, heartless, unsentimental actor. Her lids brimmed full of tears, until they spilled over onto her cheek. She looked on Guy longingly. And I felt like shit.

## Seven

*Lill*

When I called on Sunday evening, Lill didn't seem surprised at all. I asked her if she wanted to see a movie about a burnt pilot, a filmed treatise of a philosophical burn patient in a field hospital in Dresden. I told her that my favorite critics, notably Pauline Kael, had raved about the visual poetry and the lyric qualities of the film. Lill interrupted me. She told me that she would call me right back. She did.

"A babysitter thing," she said.

I told her that she should bring along Lamar, but I didn't really mean it. She said no, that's okay, she hadn't been on a date in months and Cheryl, her fast-assed cousin owed her several babysittings.

She lived in a neighborhood that was not advertised in the Newport travel brochures. I saw brothers sitting on porches, smoking blunts, and throwing dice against the aluminum sidings of listing tenements. When I knocked on the door, her cousin opened so quickly that she must have seen me coming. She looked me over and held a cigarette aloft, squinting through hazy smoke.

"Lill here?"

The girl, I assumed she was the cousin Cheryl, sucked her teeth and seemed to have already come to a conclusion about the vector of my life and what I wanted from her cousin. Under her breath, she called me Carlton or something, but I couldn't be sure. I could only be sure that she disapproved. The cousin invited me in, but I told her that I would wait on the porch. I turned around to get a full look at her neighborhood and was instantly sorry. A grown man was sitting on the hood of my car as if it were his own. He gestured towards me as if he knew me, and I had no idea what to do.

"Please get off my date's car, I heard Lill say from behind me."

"I'm just messing with him," the man said. He walked up to me as if he were going to sucker punch me, then he gave



me a soul clasp with a snap. He smiled and I was instantly relieved.

"My nigga," he said as he pulled his snap away sharply. Still smiling, the man dipped his shoulder, turned on the ball of his untied boots in a sort of raw, yet graceful pirouette, and continued rocking down the avenue.

We were in the car and several of the crouching men who had been playing dice waved at Lill. They laughed, then turned to a square jawed and light-eyed man who stood up from his crouching position and stared fiercely at my car. He wore shiny black jeans and a matching shiny black skullcap. He turned and I saw a longer, grown-up tail, swishing from the back of his head like a ponytail. Lill stared back just as fiercely and did not wave.

"I don't like Lamar growing up around these niggas here," she said. And she looked at me and her face broke open and I could see that Lill wished she had chosen other words.

At a stoplight I smelled her light, lemony perfume. I heard her breathe and felt her closeness. She wore no sunglasses. She seemed taller, more slender than at the barbershop. She wore a kind of Asian-inspired print wrap that I had seen in fashion magazines and a tight top that had a modern cut that showed off her smooth, pliable stomach. She had a light scar that ran from beneath her waistline and ended several inches above her navel. She saw me looking and covered the scar with her hand. Her bobcat eyes seemed to ease as we left her neighborhood. The light turned green. She did not look like a single mother, I thought. Then I felt embarrassed for even thinking that.

"You look beautiful," I said.

"Thank you," she said. She looked down. She pressed her palms against her dress, pressing it flat against her thighs. "Thank you," she said again.

I don't remember much of the lushly composed movie, but we held hands throughout. As we walked out, I raised a few

questions about themes, modalities, narrative drive, and ambiguous endings, but Lill simply nodded and smiled warmly. She didn't give a damn about philosophical burn patients. We stepped outside and the night hit me with a brilliant jolt of life. I heard a foghorn from the bay. Navigation lights from sailboats drifted so slowly that they might be mistaken for lighthouses. I asked Lill if she was cold and she said no. I asked her if she wanted some tea and tiramisu because it was fabulous at this café, which was still open at this hour.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

I told her.

"You mean on that street with the mansions?"

I had never thought about it in those terms, but I did live on the street with the mansions. "I guess so. Yes."

"I want to see it. I want to see it tonight."

"You don't want tea or tiramisu?"

"Fuck tiramisu."

"It's thinly crusted with incredible texture."

"I want to see your house."

"Your wish is my command."

As I drove up towards a home I was accustomed to, I realized that Lill was seeing it for the first time. It was a modernists' house, architecturally set apart from the gilded mansions along the Avenue. The house was spectacularly white and sat on a well-groomed promontory, the lights in the Japanese garden lighting a path to the heavy white door. I felt like an aristocratic colonel who had conquered the city then requisitioned the most beautiful home and made it my barracks. From the lit path, Lill gazed at the house.

"Are you rich or something?" she asked.

"Far from it."

"How can you afford all this?" she asked.

"First. Four of us pay six hundred dollars a piece. That adds up. Second, the owners don't make money from us

Navy boys. They make money on summer clients who paid thousands of dollars per week. They liked us because we're polite, we pay on time, and we don't tear the place apart. Our landlord calls us the nice Navy boys."

"Still," she said. "Still."

The house was empty. There was no Jarski to ask her if she wanted a drink, no Armstrong to commend her mind, and no Haas to segue us upstairs.

"Can I use the phone?" she asked. I gave her the mobile.

"Cheryl? I'm picking Lamar up tomorrow morning. Yes, I guess that's what it sounds like then. I'll be that then." And she hung up. Had she just told Cheryl that she was going to spend the night?

I asked Lill if she wanted a tour and she said yes. So I took her everywhere, from the nooks in the basement to the deck on the roof. She wanted to see everything. She wanted to see my roommates' bedrooms, their bathrooms, and the framed photographs that sat face down on their dressers. She asked me where they were from. If they had any brothers and sisters. In Armstrong's room, she held a photograph of a Navy wedding with all the groomsmen in summer dress whites. It was terribly gauzy and romantic, but she held it in her lap for several moments. She put the photograph down and we began kissing on Armstrong's bed.

"I think I want to sleep with you," she said.

I told her that I would like that very much.

"No, I take that back. Let's pretend."

"Pretend?"

"Let's pretend that I'm this college girl and that your parents are doctors and they're out to dinner and because I'm a nice girl you brought me back home to meet them, but they're not here. You want to fuck me very badly, but since your parents are doctors you have to pretend that you don't want to fuck me badly."

"My parents aren't doctors," I said.

"That's why it's called pretend."

"Oh."

"Now pretend that because you have to be all respectable, you're not really allowed to admit that you want to fuck me so badly that it hurts."

I followed the seam of Lill's body from the air and up to her angular desperate face and my heart sank. I told Lill that that pretending that I didn't want to fuck her would be one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life. Fucking her right then and there was what I wanted to do more than anything. We began kissing again then stopped. I led her to my bedroom. I lit several candles that I had stolen from Armstrong and placed them around my room. Her wrap was fastened by a small, businesslike hook. I unhooked the hook, unwrapped her wrap. An odd shaft of streetlight struck her thighs. I took off her top. She held her breasts in her hands.

"Where are your parents?"

"In Rivertown."

"Let's try that again. Where are your parents?"

"Oh. At dinner."

"When are they coming back?"

"I don't know. But they went to a steak house so they'll be a while."

"Can you hear them if they come in?"

"You can hear the garage door open," I said. Lill took her hands off her breasts and wrapped her arms around my neck. Lill leaned in close.

"Because I'm a nice girl. I want your parents to know that I'm a nice girl."

"You're a nice girl. I'll tell them that you're not the type."

"You sure I'm not the type?"

"No, but I'll tell them you're not. I'll do anything."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What if I get pregnant?"

"I'll take care of it."

"Will you take care of it, or take care of it?"

"I'll take care of you."

"How do you plan to do that, mister?"

"By marrying you, silly."

"Why would you marry me?"

"Because it's the right thing to do."

My eyes adjusted to the soft lighting. Lill's face was lit like a luminescent Dutch painting; through the obscura lens my eyes lingered along her honeyed brown skin, aquamarine eyes, and moist lips darkened with mocha lipstick.

My bed lay in the center of the room, candlelight seeping against the duvet's edges. One of the candles I lit blew out as she lay down on the bed. Lill took off everything. I told her she might catch a cold.

"There's a draft," she said sweetly.

I shut the window that had been cracked slightly. I told her that on some evenings love and desire occasionally commingled. She took off my shirt and pulled me down. After she unzipped me and pulled my trousers off, I felt a cool coin against my spine, then I felt her begin and my back began to arch above the sheets and I no longer felt the coin. Lill was a blur of motion. My breathing was punctured. My eyes lolled in my sockets as I was awash in warm pumping currents. Lill instantly felt when I was about to come and she changed her technique until I got close again. She did this six times and I thought I heard voices singing. One voice belonged to Teddy Pendergrass, who was singing from a chrome wheelchair and the other voice might have been my own. Once the hexagon was complete, there was nowhere to go. I kissed her before she could spit it out. She went to the

bathroom. I heard her rinsing and spitting. She came back and we began kissing again. In a few minutes, we were ready to do other things. I reached inside my nightstand for condoms, but Lill said that they were unnecessary, that she trusted me and she hadn't been with anyone since Lamar's father and she had just been checked out. Lill ran her manicured nails along the nape of my neck and the condoms remained in their packet. I did not pretend she was Nicole.

# Eight

*Zora*

On his ship, Lion couldn't understand why most of the ensigns had married right out of college to women they had dated since freshman year. Both Lion and Swilly, the two junior grade lieutenants, found the notion blasphemous to bachelorhood.

"What's the Navy coming to?" Lion asked. "Where are the swashbucklers?"

"It's the new Disney Navy," Swilly answered. "You and I won't last long in this outfit."

Lion and Swilly recounted their tales to the bored ensigns. Lion became enthusiastically disgusted with himself as he recounted the numbers and the situations, often in league with Swilly. In the years since breaking up with his college girlfriend, Lion had been on a tear, sleeping with forty-two women, forty-three if you counted the transsexual in Ft. Lauderdale. Lion didn't mention the transsexual and didn't count her either. Forty-two seemed like a large number, but if one divided that number by four years, that was a little over ten new lovers a year, maybe an extra for the leap year. There was, however, a problem: the declining quality and attractiveness was unmistakable.

He began, as Swilly put it, to slip up. Lion slept with an unattractive woman because she had gone to Harvard. Sex with her might make him smarter he told himself. He had failed to use a condom, or rather, didn't bother to find one. As his penis slipped inside the Harvard girl, the idea of contracting an STD from an Ivy Leaguer seemed thrilling, giving her one, even more so. Afterwards, he went to the ship's corpsman, who dutifully inspected the loose skin on Lion's penis, then inserted a sharp metal object into his

urethra, causing Lion to hiss in pain. All tests came up negative. Lion gave the corpsmen fifty dollars to keep his name out of the medical log.

One evening, Lion met a nice woman at a Ghent café. Her name was Zora. She had a charming heart-shaped face, but was a bit on the large size. She carried the extra sixty pounds very well. Of course, the conversation began when Lion mentioned Zora Neale Hurston. Zora said no, she was not named after the writer, and yes, she was tired of the question. She had been named after a grandmother from coastal South Carolina. The conversation began nicely, but then became a literary arms-race. They began one-upping each other in the have you read such and such? It's slow, but takes off at around page 600 fashion, with Zora steadily getting the best of Lion until Lion mentioned having studied with a famous, or rather, infamous writer at Scaife, a Barbadian dandy by the name of Henry Milius. A wicked smile stretched across Zora's face. "I want to show you something," Zora said sweetly, pulling Lion away from the café.

She drove him to her home. From shelves built over the fireplace, Zora plucked an impressive collection of Milius first editions: *Alliance of Skins*, *My Man Rinehart*, *Speaking in the Frequency*, and the highly acclaimed, highly controversial *Gentle Brown Rage*.

Zora turned down the recessed lights, lit candles, and read from her favorite passage in *Rage*. Lion listened for a few minutes then pressed the pages shut and kissed her. Zora kissed him back. They began to fumble with each other's clothes.

"Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back," she said before excusing herself. Lion thought that that was a silly order. If Lion wanted to leave, he'd just get up and leave. Perhaps she wasn't used to company staying this late. Perhaps Zora was warning him. Last exit before entering



Zora, she might be saying. Lion heard a muted flushing under running water.

With Milius' novel face down next to him, Lion lay in Zora's bed thinking, what the hell, why not? When Zora returned from the bathroom, she found Lion smiling, nude. Zora paused, but did not kick him out.

"You nasty little boy," she said while taking off her robe.

Lion left at five in the morning. He called the next day expecting to leave a message, but she picked up on the third ring and invited him back. Lion spent the next four days at Zora's home.

Zora's hospitality was extraordinary. As the owner of a restaurant, she knew how to indulge. Gourmet meals. Rare vintages. Baths. Large, flat-screen television. Going to Zora's home was akin to entering a sheik's palace. Lion found it hard to stay at his austere apartment while experiencing unfettered adoration on such a grand scale.

There were a few awkward moments:

They were roughly the same weight, Lion and Zora, so there were very few positions that wouldn't impede his breathing. Sometimes she tried to snuggle under Lion while he watched television, but he would squirm uncomfortably until Zora shifted.

There were wonderful moments:

Zora was very, very good in bed, so good, that Lion couldn't stop himself. When Zora rolled over to mount him, the entire ceiling vanished, replaced by her wide flesh. Stretch marks trailed around her shoulders and hips like intricate tidal chartings. When she lay face down on Lion, her enormous tube-shaped breasts flattened to a microscopic width. He wanted to push Zora off in disgust, but her smooth velvet rhythm drew him out. He ceased feeling shame and began to feel the tendrils of something real, that is, until the ship departed on a two-month long combat effectiveness

exercise. Lion assumed that the two months at sea would end things.

After two months at sea, the ship set sea and anchor detail and pulled in, and that's when Lion saw Zora waiting for his arrival, causing a brief moment of panic. Lion hadn't bothered to write or call her on the INMARSAT line, in fact, Lion hadn't given her any information concerning the ship's return to port, but there she was, on the pier, waiting like the rest of the wives and dedicated girlfriends.

Zora saw Lion. She waved, hopping up and down, her girth rippling through her purple dress. She held onto a tight formation of shiny balloons that were heart-shaped like her face. In those two months she had gotten even bigger. Swilly, who noticed everything, saw Zora gesticulating in Lion's direction. Lion hadn't told Swilly about Zora.

"Who is she?" Swilly asked very slowly.

"I could tell you..."

"...but then you'd have to kill me?"

Lion paraphrased a line from an old movie: "I met a girl at a café. It was a big mistake."

"Big mistake," Swilly the quip-master replied.

"Ha ha," Lion said without laughing.

Swilly retreated to his official naval officer voice. He had the ability to go on and on without breaking up into laughter. "Your deception is understandable, yet regrettable. You are accused of dating a rather corpulent woman without informing the proper authorities. That amounts to a certain betrayal of trust. This breach of trust cannot be tolerated."

"You are right," Lion replied in his own voice, "At eight bells, keelhaul me without an ounce of grog to relieve the pain, sir."

Swilly stayed in character. "Sudden humility and regret, while noted and appreciated, have come far too late

in this sad affair. I'm putting you on notice. The Junior Officer Protection Association will convene immediately and decide your fate."

Lion broke character first—laughing at the idea of a kangaroo court formed to investigate the matter. He gazed once more on the pier, looking for those silly heart-shaped balloons. Zora continued to ripple on the pier as she waved. Lion did not wave back; instead, he nodded slightly. That thin acknowledgment registered on Zora's face. She appeared perplexed, perhaps wondering if she was waving at the same man who had once spent a glorious week at her home, the same man she waited on hand and foot, the man she did things to that were downright biblical.

From the starboard Harpoon deck, Lion thought he saw Zora weeping. Swilly had noticed as well.

"Jesus, Lion, what did you do to her?"

Lion tried to reply, but the ship's whistle shrilled, signaling a shift of colors from amidships to stern. Tugs continued to push against the ship as lines were thrown over, binding ship to pier.

Lion watched as an incredibly beautiful woman placed her arms around Zora. "My goodness, who is that creature?" Lion cried out. "They ought to put her likeness on the prow of a man-o-war."

The crowd on the pier numbered about three or four hundred, but Swilly immediately knew whom Lion referred to.

The woman seemed to be consoling Zora. Lion watched the woman's hair change from sorrel to a dark copper brown in the bright morning light. She wore a knee-length brown dress with open-toed heels. If it hadn't been for Zora's presence, Lion would have leapt off the ship and kissed her ravishing collarbone. The woman broke his spell when she waved to a sailor on the fantail. The sailor acknowledged her with a quick wave then went back to heaving the spring line. Lion turned back to tell Swilly that the woman was spoken for, but Swilly was already closing the hatch behind him.

Lion watched Swilly cross the brow onto the pier. As the ship's official representative, he immediately made himself useful to Zora and the beautiful pale creature with the collarbone that needed to be kissed.

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It had been five months since Zora surprised Lion on the pier. For weeks afterward, he would hear his buzzer at home. He'd turn to the security channel on the television and watch her miserable face looking up at the camera. He'd listen to her pleas for a while. She begged Lion to tell her that it was over to her face, and when Lion refused, she buzzed all the apartments and hurled accusations against Lion's character, most of them true. Gradually, she stopped showing up, the neighbors stopped complaining, and life went back to normal.

One night, Lion planned to attend a reading by his old English professor, Henry Milius. Milius was on a fifteen-city tour. Lion mentioned the reading to Swilly. He had been in a funk for months and Lion couldn't seem to shake him out of it. Swilly perked up and went to the exec's room to make a phone call, but when he returned to the stateroom, he was sullen once again.

Lion was content to attend the reading alone, eager to hear Milius' voice again. Having already published several novels, Milius had just published his first collection of short stories and was gaining widespread popularity. The small following resented the new acolytes. The old fans considered themselves to be in the literary know.

Lion did not count himself among any ranks. Always one to bite the hand, Milius dismissed his own following as literary groupies. "Mindless, vicarious, consumptive creatures," Henry called them. "They prostrate themselves before my languid, yet detached prose because they imagine such prose matches their languid, yet detached lives." The

characters in Henry's novel were passionless, middle-class black families living in quiet, sexless, disillusioned anger.

Milius' last novel was about a favored son, a disaffected ACLU lawyer who murders liberal white people for no other reason than white liberals were more interesting to murder than white conservatives. Lion read his books with relish.

Lion walked from his apartment in Freemason to the downtown bookstore. He turned a corner and saw the bookstore, lit from inside, alive with smokers greeting each other with warm hugs. The movement of bright red brake lights lent the block a cosmopolitan air, as if Henry had the type of readers who took cabs when they needed transportation.

It had been six or seven years since Lion had last seen Milius. Lion stepped inside the bookstore and was suddenly seized with a mildly terrible thought: What if Milius didn't remember him? Lion never stood out in class. He wrote the papers and answered the questions with prosaic earnestness, but that was all. Lion felt so unnerved, he slipped into the bookstore bathroom and doused his face at the basin.

Becalmed, Lion felt the buzz inside the bookstore—a knowledge that they, the audience, were on the ground floor of literary stardom. People were already beginning to sit down in the aisles. Lion darted for a single empty seat in the first row.

The bookstore owner took the podium and began to tick off Milius' achievements, when Lion heard a scattering wave of applause and saw heads craning backwards. A waving and smiling Milius walked towards a chair adjacent the podium, surprising the crowd even though his presence was expected. While Milius sat waiting for the introduction to end, he glanced towards Lion, back to his notes, then, startled, stared back in Lion's direction. Lion smiled back and waited to be recognized.

"Lion, my man!" Milius cackled. Milius stood. Lion stood. The men walked towards each other and embraced. The audience tuned out the bookstore owner. "My former student," Milius explained to the audience. The audience nodded in understanding. Lion felt a tremendous amount of goodwill flow in his direction. He guessed that the audience felt privy to something special, a rekindling friendship between teacher and former student. The crowd warmed their hands to it.

As Lion sat down, he noticed a pair of attractive women—one gorgeous and the other merely good-looking—behind him. The two were seated three rows behind and to the right. They both looked oddly familiar, but Lion could not get a good look at them without staring. The merely good-looking woman seemed to bear Lion a grudge. Whenever Lion glanced back, he sensed the eyes behind her large dark sunglasses. A stylish cloche adorned with silken stitched flowers hid her hair. She reminded Lion of a flapper. She shared Zora's stylish verve.

He glanced back at the flapper's companion. She wore a black blazer over a low cut, sheer black blouse. Her hair was long and brownish red and her face dusted with light-brown freckles. She seemed to be searching the crowd for someone. Lion had to will himself not to stare. Lion sat down and listened as Milius chuckled at the exploits of his murderous protagonist. After an enduring applause, the bookstore owner invited the audience to ask questions.

"Dr. Milius, are you the torchbearer of Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin?" a woman's voice asked. Lion, along with the entire audience, twisted and turned towards the voice.

The bookstore owner asked the person to stand up. "Please repeat the question and tell us your name."

The flapper took off her sunglasses and stood up. Lion felt the press of recognition against his chest. The flapper wasn't a flapper; the flapper wasn't a friend of Zora's; the

flapper was Zora. He hadn't seen Zora in months and now he barely recognized her. Her face, once wide and heart-shaped, was now angled and sharp, a marquise cut. Lion looked over her thin frame and visually calculated her weight loss at about sixty, perhaps even seventy pounds. A thin ripple of flesh hung from the back of her arms. Lion thought he'd seen a ghost.

Lion turned his attention to Zora's beautiful friend. Her jacket hung from her seat, her beautiful collarbone had been dusted with a sort of stardust, giving her a mythical, magical appeal.

Henry signed dozens of books, answered several questions, and generally played the part of the jolly good writer, all while exchanging glances with Zora and her beautiful friend.

Finally, the lights flickered on and off, prompting the owner to thank Milius, and then, in the next sentence, complain that he'd go out of business if better writers didn't come along. Milius forced the bookstore owner to admit that he wasn't going anywhere with customers like Zora and Elena around. Elena blushed. God, Lion thought, how he would love to be loved by that woman. They all hugged the bookstore owner goodbye and stood outside. No one wanted to go home just yet, least of all Lion. He wanted to get close to Elena, but then he had to deal with Zora. He cursed to himself. He watched Zora close Milius like prey. Milius looked up.

"My manners. Lion this is—"

"Hello, Zora," Lion said. He shook her hand limply.

"How long has it been, Lion?" Zora said pulling Lion in and kissing his cheek roughly. Same perfume, different woman.

"How do you two know each other?" Henry asked. Lion remained silent.

"Small town," Zora said.

"I should get going," Elena said hoping someone would give her an excuse to tell her husband. Lion noticed that even in the dark he could make out her brown freckles. Lion couldn't take his eyes off her.

Zora roped Elena in. "Girl, you're not going anywhere. We're hanging out tonight." Elena submitted without argument.

"You hungry, Lion?" Milius asked.

"Starving," Lion said, looking at Elena.

Elena suggested Zora's restaurant, but Zora nixed the idea. Lion suggested the Dumbwaiter, one of the few interesting restaurants in Norfolk. The menu was a fusion of French country and southern Creole, and the restaurant was within walking distance. Milius placed the crook of his arm out and Zora took it. Lion did the same, but Elena hesitated.

"Is something wrong?" Lion asked pleasantly. He looked at Elena and felt lightheaded.

"I was hoping to meet someone tonight," Elena replied.

"Who would that be?" Lion asked.

"A friend."

"Is that why you were looking around in the bookstore?"

"You saw that?"

"I saw everything you did." That included the wedding ring that Elena wasn't wearing.

During the meal, other diners attempted to stare, then hush the four into being quiet. After the third time, Milius wondered aloud why white people felt compelled to silence loud black people. A new burst of laughing prompted a new round of staring. Lion had never seen Milius that giddy. Lion pulled his seat back a bit, watching him and Zora in deep conversation.

"I've got all of your books, but my favorite is Gentle Brown Rage."



"I still get death threats over that one. I'm under a sort of Negro fatwa. Clarence Thomas and Henry Milius," he said, intertwining his fingers.

Lion laughed, "Peas in pod."

"Yes, except that Clarence never gets invited to those awful Negro literary conferences. If I ever sit next to bell hooks or Ishmael Reed again..."

"I hope you never become popular, Dr. Milius. I like having you all to myself," Zora said. She smiled lasciviously then gulped down her dry Riesling. Lion saw her throat muscles moving the wine along.

"Zora," Milius announced drolly, "you make me feel like a school boy. And by the way, let's do away with this Dr. business. Please call me 'Professor'." Milius winked. Zora howled. Lion drank from a glass of wine and rolled his eyes.

"I haven't had this much fun since my first novel got shitty reviews in Callaloo," Milius said, placing a mocking hand over his mouth, his eyes large as tuna cans. "Oh goodness, did that rhyme?"

Years ago, Lion's former classmates had summed the clues—Milius' fussy Edwardian stage manners, his starched white shirts, his falsetto laugh, his West Indian lilt, his obsession with Burberry, and came to the false conclusion that Milius was a homosexual. Lion knew better. Beautiful girls followed Milius like lambs to slaughter because they were unafraid. Lion knew a few of those lambs from his Scaife days.

Elena jumped when her cell phone rang. She excused herself with a forced smile. Lion watched the top of Elena's head as she walked past the hostess.

"I wonder what kind of man would let that beautiful creature step out alone," Milius said as they both watched the top of her head. "Well, I'm off to shake hands with the pope." Milius threw his napkin on the table.

Lion took a sip of wine and looked at Zora.

"I want to thank you," Zora said pleasantly.

"For what?"

"For doing this-" sweeping her arms over her body "-to me."

Lion cringed in discomfort. "I apologize Zora. I handled it badly. At times, I can be a coward, but I can't take credit for that."

"Fuck you. You're a coward, but I'm giving credit where credit is due."

"All right, then."

"You made me disgrace myself."

Lion repeated his apology.

"Okay. I'm over it. But something good did come out of this. I mean look at me? And there's the new people in my life. Your friend comforted me that day. He was very good to me. And Elena, I can't say enough about her. She had never seen me, but she treated me like family. She saw me sobbing and immediately put her hand around me. Now she hates you more than I do. Isn't that odd? We've become good friends, you know."

"Friends are wonderful things to have."

"So what do you think of Elena?"

"I guess you could say she's a nice looking woman," Lion said. He wondered how bald-faced his lie seemed.

"Anyway, stop acting like her publicist. She doesn't need one. And neither does Henry, speaking of which, what do you think of Henry?"

"At first I thought he might be gay, but I think I've changed my mind."

"When was that?"

"Just now, when he invited me back to his hotel room."

"Are you going?"

"I'm going and I'm giving that little black anglophile a heart attack. The things I can do with the weight off. I've never had such a thrill of power. Women like Elena take it for granted. With me, it's like a new weapon. I want to

use it for the powers of evil. You remember how good I was? Well, I'm like ten times better, ten times freakier."

"That's good to know."

"If you want, I'd--"

"Zora."

"I was going to ask you about Elena. You would like to be with her, wouldn't you? But I'm here and that makes it awkward."

Lion sipped his wine.

"I bet you feel like you could fall in love with her, couldn't you?"

"Elena is married. Even if I wanted to—and there's a husband."

"Interesting. Your friend said the same thing."

Swilly?

"You didn't know?"

Swilly.

"I must say, Lion, the expression on your face is priceless."

Fucking Swilly.

Elena and Henry came back to the table as soon as dessert and coffee was served. Elena laughed to herself.

"What is it, darling?" Milius asked.

"Oh nothing," Elena said, giggling.

"Oh come now, child. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I was on the cell talking to my friend, and this car drives up and this guy exposed himself."

"Where is the sick bastard?" Lion said. He was drunk and would have fought a man for the right to defend Elena's honor.

"Excuse me," Zora interrupted. "Do you remember the night we first met?"

"What did Lion do the first night you met?" Milius asked. Lion wasn't sure what the tone of the question. Did it mean that Milius was jealous, or was he simply curious about Lion's failings?

"I went to the bathroom—" Zora began. She looked sideways at Lion and continued. Lion felt acutely ill.

"Is that really necessary?"

"—and when I came back Lion was holding his thing in his hand."

Lion protested vigorously. "There is a big difference." He tried to argue over the laughter. Milius warned him not to protest too much. Lion was forced to tell them the story of what happened when he was eleven years old. Milius took great interest in this thread and began to pepper Elena and Lion with questions, the greater number towards Lion.

What did he look like?

Pitted skin? Yes, of course.

Scar tissue on his knuckles?

A blue Buick with a rusty grill.

To the steering wheel? My goodness.

A watch? You're kidding. Digital or analog?

Lion answered Milius' questions quickly, without elaboration, without measure of consequences. The waitress dropped the check on the table and began breaking down table settings.

"Oh my God, what time is it?" Elena asked. Elena immediately realized what she had said. For a full minute, they could not stop laughing. All, except Lion. Milius continued to chuckle even as he sat down in the cab next to Zora.

Despite the four glasses of wine and two gin and tonics, Lion did not hesitate to get into his car and drive to the ship at two in the morning. The gate guard gave him no trouble. He walked briskly past the quarterdeck watch, opened a quick acting hatch, and took a right into the blue-tiled officer's country, into the dark, cruelly lit passageway. The air conditioning droned as Lion made his way to the stateroom he shared with Swilly. Lion whipped the blue curtains aside and found Swilly sleeping, his mouth

wide open like a sleeping gargoyle. He wouldn't hit a sleeping man, so Lion shook Swilly awake. Swilly cursed lightly and turned on his rack lights. Swilly squinted up at Lion.

"Is it true?" Lion asked.

Swilly's face contorted with confusion, then the lines in his thin intelligent face eased into comprehension.

"I had dinner with Zora and Elena." Lion watched Swilly's face. "It's true, isn't it?" Lion asked again. Swilly was slightly amused. Lion couldn't help himself. A hard, pneumatic blow to the side of the Swilly's head would have taken the smirk off his face, but Lion didn't do it

"She's getting a divorce. We're getting married. We're happy." Happy. That word, more than anything, set Lion off. He found the notion preposterous. Although it was absurd for him to act this way, Lion couldn't help himself. He felt cheated out of the happiness he could have had with Zora, and the fantasy of a life with Elena. He wanted to beat Swilly.

"Why should you be happy?" Lion remembered screaming at Swilly.

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A year had gone by and Lion still patronized the same bookstore. The owner recognized Lion and brought over a men's fashion magazine, one that occasionally published fiction.

"Go to page eighty-seven," the owner ordered. Lion complied and found a new short story by Henry Milius, entitled The Short, Happy Life of Lieutenant Lyon. Lion read the first sentence and snorted. Was this some kind of joke? What kind of spelling was "L-Y-O-N?" But that wasn't Lion's greatest concerns. There were other things in print: the Buick's crooked grill, the scar tissue, the pitted skin, the coarse voice, the yellow light, the lack of cut, the pink

underside, the watch with two hands. Five pages later, she appeared: a beautiful Creole ghost with shimmering red hair. Lion seethed. He sat down in the middle of the bookstore and read it again. The details were accurate to a fault. It was story about an affair between an officer-Lyon-and an enlisted man's wife-Eve. A scholarly man with an eye for detail, Milius got all the details right, from the type of missiles on deck (Harpoons), to Zora's (now Sara) perfume, fragility, and new powers. In the last scene, the officer and the enlisted man's wife decide to end the affair while standing between the stacks of a used bookstore that resembled this one. They part ways then come back to the stacks and embrace. The couple cannot end the affair. They are willing to suffer the consequences. The story ends with both hope and doom.

Bastard.

A few patrons turned. Lion realized he was thinking out loud. So what?

The real story ended less ambiguously. Elena's husband discovered the affair and confronted his wife. When she admitted the affair and moved out of the home, the husband took a nine-millimeter from the armory, walked into Lion and Swilly's stateroom, and waited for Swilly to show. After tiring of waiting, the husband pointed the gun towards the roof of his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Lion and Swilly were transferred pending the results of the investigation. Lion was questioned concerning the sailor's stateroom of choice. Lion told the agents that he had no idea.

"What did you think?" the bookstore owner asked.

"About what?" Lion said, annoyed at the interruption.

The bookstore owner appeared exasperated. "The story, man."

Lion ignored the owner. He patiently regarded the magazine, lifting it slightly as if the content of the story increased the page weight. In the story, Eva was Lyon's

lover, not Swilly's. In the story, there was no Swilly. Lion's fury eased a bit. The thieving Milius had taught Lion a distant lesson on how life might be, not how life is, a lesson that Lion couldn't quite put into words. He blew a good thing with Zora. He was willing to pine for Elena, but wasn't willing to suffer like Swilly. He was afraid of things unseen and Milius knew it. That was why Milius was the writer, Lion thought, and he was not.

## Nine

*Descent*

On the night before we went on a six-month deployment, I made reckless asides to the hostess at the Dumbwaiter. The hostess lived with her father, a retired Master Chief, not

far from the base so she agreed to give me a ride home. We met in the parking lot. Outside the bar, the still coolness of air long in memory of a close ocean sobered us, sobered me. That late night bloom of scrubbed, seaborne air held my corrupted spirit aloft. I felt cleansed in the salty, romantic air, handsome in the presence of women, and desirous of love, song, and a snappy repartee, but in no particular order.

I flashed my military ID to the gate guard at the Navy Base and though I'm sure the guard smelled the liquor on my breath, he let me through with an insolent sneer. Not even a hint of military courtesy. I told the hostess to back up, I needed to have a word with the gate guard. The guard leaned into the car window. He was a few years older than me.

"What's wrong, bruh?" the guard asked.

"Bruh? When talking to an officer, it is customary to begin or end a question with military courtesy, such as sir or ma'am. After said business has been concluded, the junior shall salute his superior. Now where the fuck is my salute, Bruh?"

The guard's eyes became slits, but he came to attention and saluted. We continued through the gate.

"He could have pulled us over. My Dad would kill me if I got a DUI."

I stared at her. "Who are you?" I asked. "Whoever you are, you sure are beautiful." And she laughed, thinking I was joking.

I felt the engine reverberations of a C-2 as it taxied on the tarmac, and it took all my reserve not to leap out of her car and hug a propeller. I didn't know if I wanted to fuck or die, or be in some space between, longing for the emotion close to being filmed in black and white.

Once inside the room (teetering with indistinguishable nautical paintings), I sat on the edge of the bed and fondled a flimsy remote while she stood blocking my view of the television. While she unbuttoned her silk blouse, I



aimed the remote at her, pressing buttons and pretending to be uninterested in the programming. She undressed with studied precision. The effect of the martinis forced her to concentrate. She rocked unsteadily, but her fingers remained slow and sure. When she was done, she looked up and smiled like a child seeking approval. Her breasts were smaller, pointed, and her aureole darker than I had anticipated.

Then I had an odd moment, a pondering of future regret. I considered telling the hostess to put her clothes back on, but that would have been out of character. I wanted sex. I wanted her to want sex as well, but I also wanted sweet hesitation, a moment of indecision that necessitated a lengthy plea, but such indecision was not forthcoming. Afterwards, I slept without knowing. I could hardly lay my mind exposed to sleep and dreams, thinking the alarm clock was going to blare at any moment and crack my dream in two as the hour to the ship neared.

I dreamt of Nicole while the hostess lay next to me. Nicole Nicole Nicole. I dreamt of her every night and fucked her with my palms every other. I could not let go. I saw her like an owl seeing movement in a bed of dead leaves. My mind's sky was free of clouds and I looked down and saw Nicole with other men. She was sweet, enticing. It didn't take her long. She worked faster than the hostess. Faster than I did, I thought. Nicole teased them, then fucked them, then sucked them off. She did it all. Every night I went to sleep imagining her wipe excess lotion from her nude, kiss-high thighs. I saw the top half of her face, those wonderfully expressive brown eyes full of desire for another man. I wrote desperate letters and waited for mail call unrequited.

Let me tell you about my recurring nightmare.

Nicole and I are having dinner at an Italian restaurant. Nicole is radiant. We are falling in love all over again. The waiter brings a menu. He's smiling. No. He's smirking. He hands me the menu and walks away. He disappears

through the double-doors to the kitchen. The menu is difficult to open, but when it finally parts, it does so with the sound of peanut butter-smeared lips smacking, or dogs being pulled apart. Inside the menu is a very generous amount of semen. I look up and Nicole is gone. Outside, a car drives away. The waiter and Nicole.

In the morning the hostess dropped me off at the head of the pier and waved goodbye without a hint of sadness and that made my heart dip a notch. Other men were on the pier kissing their wives goodbye. I turned to my ship, a thirty-year old destroyer and felt that ancient sailor's ennui fall on me like a sheet of cold rain.

The engines were started. The special sea and anchor detail called away and my division mustered on the sparrow deck. We let go all lines, then watched the pier get further and further away. The linehandlers eyed the pretty wives and girlfriends tossing air kisses and smirked, aware what a lonely woman might do in a span of six months.

The ship passed beneath a bridge, the emerald city to starboard, followed by high rugged cliffs. In clear weather, the white cliffs appeared as whitecaps from fifteen nautical miles, and so did the problems. The alcoholic and the heroin addict whose names had once been called at quarters were now gone. The married girls who had been turned out were under orders of chastity; the embarrassing photographs in a loose chain of custody had been misplaced and were now being passed around like well-fingered porn in the junior officer's stateroom.

I stood midwatches with the youthful, handsome Auxiliaries Officer. Auxo was thin and angular as broken cornstalks in wide-legged trousers, his shoulder blades knifing the back of his shirt like dull switchblades. He was a rosy-cheeked boy who had nearly failed out of Exeter, only to land at the only school that would accept him: Annapolis. Whatever port we were in, girls called him James Dean and waited to be taken, but he was hopelessly paralyzed in the

presence of beautiful women, that is, until he drank himself brave. By then, his chances had gone with the tide, the sure thing passed like the grin on her face. And yet, as if to mock him, his seamanship was superb; he deferred to no one on the bridge save the captain.

I would walk up from combat and Auxo would tell me his life's story on the bridge wing. He lived with the regrets of an old man. Goddamn me, he said again and again he said, Goddamn me. The Navy was killing him because he knew he was good and if there was one thing he hated more than being a boat school grad, it was being a good naval officer. He considered Annapolis a tech school for farm boys. He degraded his Conning Officer (a Youngster when Auxo was a Firsty) by giving deck orders in fluent French, which brought the bridge team to tears. Auxo fucking with the First Louie again, they'd say. The bridge team did not know that the more Auxo degraded the First Lieutenant in a foreign language, the more he despised himself.

One bright night, Auxo threw his academy ring into the Arabian Sea, its waters shimmering in the late evening. The ring flashed like flying fish and sank half as fast. We laughed. Just before dawn, the silken liquid constellation rose high. The brilliance reminded me of a beautiful Indian goddess armed with daggers, lowering herself into my outstretched arms. She appreciated Auxo's sacrifice. And then suddenly, we remembered to give the order to turn on the Navigation Lights, and for the quartermaster to observe sunset. Then the watch was over.

I told Auxo about my early, enlisted years, I had no ambition other than to get through the watch. I knew nothing but to keep my head on a swivel. I went out for the smoker's tournament only because Kobb got hurt. That, and Blinky told me about all the good deals to be had. I told Auxo about the Marine, Corporal Harris, whom I'll never forget, who

immediately began uncorking vicious wood-chopping blows to my kidney. I told Auxo how my arms were at my side, how the Corporal hit me in the temple with a hammer and my legs went out. I motioned that I was quitting, but Blinky kept his towel wrapped around his neck. And how I fought on scared until I let them hands go. Auxo did not believe it.

"You fought in smokers?"

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

I went on about how the Corporal won the second round on points, but on the last half minute I caught Gorbock with two straight rights to the head. This gave me some space. In the final round, I found my range and began to savagely rock the Corporal's head like a rag doll until I won by technical knockout. More importantly, my CO had watched the fight. A week later, he invited me up to the bridge during flight ops. He sat in a brown leather chair with a savage grace while department heads came to him with hushed reports before Caesar. He had a wind-creased, reddened face, and the gravity of a man who had seen combat, participated in it, and gone back home to help his father till the land without complaint. I stood at parade rest waiting for the captain to acknowledge my presence. The exec came to the bridge. He winked at me than approached the captain with familiarity. He reminded the captain why I was there. The captain nodded. He whisked his chair around and faced me. I vaguely recall the buzz of reports coming over loudspeakers, the language of aviation foreign to my ears. I felt like a tourist in a souk. The captain took off his aviator glasses. Wiped them with a handkerchief handed to him by the air boss.

"Young man," the captain said, putting his glasses back on, and then patting his heft, "can you believe I fought welter at Annapolis?"

When I went back to my rack, I found an application for an officer's program on my rack and orders to fill it by 0800 the next day.

On that same rogue ship, some boys liked other boys. A few liked to sport dungaree pants low and tight around the hips. They called out to one another on the messdecks in an effeminate drawl. Nearly all had been in King Neptune's Court, elaborately dressed as beautiful sea-maidens. On Wog Night, all hell broke loose as wogs were rounded up, herded into lounge area, and forced on all fours. We pollywogs endured an entire night of larded humiliation. During the chaos of abuse and bloody wog fights (set up like dog fights), scuttlebutt held that the boys were being sold to other men, and one sailor, a masculine top, took exception and decided to fight for his lover. Days after we were all shellbacks, he was taken to sea by a rogue wave. It was dark and the wave was silent. The sailor was there one moment, the ship heeled, righted, and he was gone. His buddies didn't even realize he was missing. They thought he had dipped inside the skin of the ship through a watertight hatch. When his shipmates could not find him in berthing, the family, as they called themselves, began checking everywhere: mess lines, the gym, the library, his rack, everywhere. Fear set in. The captain's voice cracked as he summoned the missing sailor again and again on the LMC, ordering him to come forth and end this silly game of hide go seek, but the captain was calling for a dead man. His watery death right out of an Eliot poem. I knew because Chan had relieved me for the fifteen minutes it took to find the boy, lure him to a catwalk, and toss him into the sea myself. So there it is.

Let me tell you about the girls in foreign ports, I told Auxo. Some girls smelled like rosewater and pencil shavings; some girls carried hopes of an allotment straight into hotel beds. Most girls were without malice or pretense. They came to the ship early in the morning before we got underway. At the bars while an Oasis song played, the girls danced and put their lips to your ear and asked if you really did have a girl in every port. Of course you said yes

and smiled, but she thought that really meant no, but she didn't mind because it was all understood. What she didn't know was that girls asked this question in every port. In the last and in the next, girls would ask, Do you have a girl in every port? And if the girl asked, then you knew you would be all right that evening.

I remember Ryoko, a Japanese girl, whose wonderful woodsy scent took me back to grade school, clumsily walking between desks towards a stainless pencil sharpener stationed next to Mary Fernandez, my first love, the aroma of pencil shavings arousing me again and again. And as I left that morning to go back to the ship, Ryoko's mood changed for the dark. Without warning, she became furious as she wrote down her address and phone number. She handed me a scrap of paper and insisted that I was son of a bitch and that I would lose the information. I told her the truth. We had a wonderful time together, and I'd be damned to hell if I lost it. I must have promised her twenty times that I would not lose it, but as soon as I got back to the ship and reached inside my pocket, it was no longer there. I searched for hours, and for the life of me, could not find that scrap of paper.

My roommate, the rakish Electrical Officer, was incapable of not seducing women. He thought we were alike. He smiled and licked his lips to tease the enlisted women. He smelled wonderful all hours of the day. I remember the way he used to slap baby powder on his bare chest in the morning. He had a good act. He was a gentleman and a man of the South, a graduate from a prestigious college in Atlanta; putting up posters of Good Black Men inside his wall locker. He was hyperaware of his good looks and to the women who couldn't help themselves. In Australia, we brought two girls back to the hotel and Electro immediately went to the bathroom and came out naked, the silhouette of his penis blanking the television screen, startling the girls. As he walked, his penis swung back and forth like a shadow sweeping across the plains. I watched in awe as he beat the

girl senseless with his dick. His voice became gruff and arrogant as he told her what he was doing. What he was going to do a little later. The other girl and I watched in amazement. And when he was done with his girl, he called out ding-ding, ding-ding, as if the round was over. He held his dick in his left hand and reached for my girl with his right. Ding-ding, ding-ding, he said again. Electro pulled my date onto his bed and she looked back towards me, hoping for intervention. I did nothing. I left the hotel room and played blackjack until I lost a month's pay.

I thought my luck had changed when I met a thin, multiracial girl with the figure of a ballet dancer. Losing all that money had made her feel sorry for me and she took me out for a drink. Five drinks later, we were ready to go to my hotel room, but by then Electro had two new girls trailing him. He took me by the arm. These girls are like shoes man, Electro said. They come in pairs. We got to be out, he insisted. The ballet dancer suddenly went berserk when she saw me embrace one of the new girls. The ballet dancer began to cry and hit me with her tiny fists and when I asked her why was she doing this, she told me it was because I reminded her of her father. I felt for her and began to tell the new girl maybe another time. But the new girl was heartless as she stared sadly at the ballet dancer with cold gray eyes. I'd be angry, too, she remarked, after hearing the commotion. She spent all that time with a man who reminds her of Pa and now I'm going to take him home and shag him. She looked right at me and smiled, her eyes ice blue. I went with her.

In Singapore. I picked up a honey brown Malaysian girl at a bar called Kilimanjaro. We went to my hotel room. There were no awkward moments, even when she remarked that she still had a day left on her cycle. I told her not to worry about it. We could kiss and tell each other stories, but she insisted. Very light, she said. She revealed enormous pendulous breasts, but was otherwise unremarkable and I went

out the next night looking for someone new. I then happened upon a jazz club and I heard this pure voice despairing over a man that called her honey and took her money. The lyrics were clichéd, but the voice was wild, leaping, and potent with heartbreaking, sexual gospel. I rushed to the stage to see who owned that tremendous voice, and there she was, the girl I had slept with the night before.

Then there was the beautiful girl who wasn't. It was the kind of tale every sailor had in his seabag of half-truths. She was dark, multi-ethnic, vivacious, and naturally, mysterious. I saw this a physically gifted girl in a tiny bikini glide by in a single speed beachcruiser. I quickly made a U-turn and pulled alongside in a rented convertible. As she pedaled and I drove, we flirted until the drivers behind honked impatiently. I suddenly asked for her phone number and to my surprise, she gave it to me. It was all so brilliant on my part. At the hotel that night, I called and within a few minutes, she had invited me over. I told her I needed to coordinate with my buds. Even before I got off the phone, Swilly and the rest of my buds were looking at me sternly. They had already confirmed my suspicions. My buds had seen her on the beach, too. She was with two or three others that were dead on dudes at fifty yards. Why would a real girl hang out with two transvestites, they asked rhetorically? Goddamn. That beautiful, gorgeous girl with nine thousand-dollar breasts was a marvel of hormones, medical technology, and feminine gestures. And yes, she was a man. It killed me, but I knew it was true. Despite their exhortations to do otherwise, I called her back and asked point blank. Were you born a little boy or a little girl? She did not hesitate. A darling little boy, she replied and I swear she said it so sweetly that my dick got hard. I did not hang up. She told me about her childhood, about her decision to make the break, and how she made a living. She didn't have the money for a proper sex change operation from this highly skilled surgeon whose



practice was in Colorado. There was a local surgeon who performed the same operation for a lot less money, but she complained that he couldn't make a good pussy to save his life. I wondered if her two girlfriends had bad pussies. I asked her what kind of men she liked, and she told me that she liked tall, dark, straight men, kind of like you. I looked up and saw my buds staring at me. Let me call you back, I said quietly. I began making an excuse, but she cut me off with a growling, intense, manly voice. The manly voice asked, Are you coming over or what? Jesus Christ. I couldn't lie. I want to come over, I told her, but my boys are listening. They know what's up. I told her that I needed to drink some more, a lot more, and then I might consider. As soon as I got off the phone, my boys pinned me to the ground and made me promise to never, ever find out if she really was born a little boy.

We came back to the ship, imagining what may have happened if the boys weren't there to save my ass (literally, Auxo added), and I saw a thick letter on my rack, a wedding invitation that had been placed on my sheets. It had arrived in mail call while I was out gallivanting with a transvestite. The invitation was heavy, the texture of weighted linen. I tore the letter open. Nicole was going to marry Guy Glickman, rap and movie producer. The invitation was ecru, with robin egg trim. The wedding would be on Martha's Vineyard, on a yacht named Sweet Betty. And to think, I was almost over her.

There are a few things you notice when you leave the Navy. For instance, here on shore, the toilet paper is much softer. You have a nice comfortable bed. You wake up and see squirrels frolicking in my backyard. You never get seasick. You smell only your own farts. You could call your parents every day. You take your trousers to the cleaners. Everything is hunky-dory. Girls smile and say hello and you say hello back and they hear your lack of accent and then

ask you where you're from. You get invited to church. They ask, What was it like in the Navy?

It's like this, you say, smiling. Of course, what you really want to do is hold your nuts.

You need to suffer through another numbing watch. You need to vomit out over the starboard wheelhouse, or smell the Electrical Officer's flatulence while brushing your teeth, or eat the same foul chow, or wade in the filth of raw sewage while taking a midnight shit. You need to masturbate for the thousandth time to the same rotating lineup of fantasies night after fucking night right into your favorite patrol sock, so full of dry jism that it looked like a tiny dog standing on its hind legs.

You order another pizza then fondle your balls while Mexican bimbos jiggle on Spanish television. You're surprised by how fast your beard grows. Your savings will be gone in two months, but Mom said you could have the basement. It's the most absurd thing that's ever come out of anyone's mouth, you think. You watch girls and feel absolutely nothing. And when you do feel, you prefer feeling married women. Who needs to be hamstrung by women obsessed with fidelity? You burn phosphorous holes through the fucking sofa. You miss foreign ports where relationships ran their course in five days and you got anal by the third.

You miss that strange triangulation of longing: home, sea, and foreign ports. You long for the smell of souks, sewage, and seaspray at this very moment, exactly when there is no one to talk to. There is someone, you think. Nicole. You retrieve the wedding invitation from the bottom of the seabag and find out that she'll be married in two weeks.

You get into the car and drive six hours to her city apartment and wait outside in a rental. When Nicole walks out, you follow her to a diner. She has three cups of tea and a toasted wheat bagel. When she walks out, you get the bum you hired to stop her and ask for a cigarette and a light. Ever the kindhearted woman, she gives him a cigarette

and even lights it. She still smokes menthols. And that's when you see the engagement ring from a city block away. Fucking Guy Glickman. Rap Producer. Movie Producer. Rich White boy.

The bum comes back.

"How did she look?

"How did she smell?"

"Did she look you in the eye?"

"She smiled at me," the bum said giving me my money back. "You don't know what it's like for a pretty girl to smile at you."

I screamed at the bum as he tried to walk away. I pulled him by his shoulder. "What the fuck do you know? You're a goddamn bum."

"I had a full life, mister. I know plenty. Now take your money and leave me be."

"What do you know about Nicole or Lill or Zora or Elena? Or Blinky the cornerman? I wouldn't be an officer if he had thrown in the towel. Or the pretty boys on the messdecks, or the sailor I threw into the warm waters of the Indian Ocean? Have you ever fallen in love with a girl in a foreign port because that's as close to matrimony as you'll ever get? How can I tell you about the exhilaration of racing through the rain soaked streets of Subic City, whose dark wet streets, and nighttime drizzle made me feel in touch with the woman I'd never make love to again? What would it mean if I tell you the story about how our executive officer saw me, one of his officers, drunk, pulling wheelies on a stolen motorcycle, a beautiful Filipina bar girl clinging sweetly to my sweating back, not a single helmet between us, and the exec asks where exactly do you think you're going? And as I gun that tired little engine, I turn to the exec and say for a little ride, sir, a little ride, and then we take off, scattering three chickens and a mangy dog that refused to bark, out past the neon signs, past the whore traps and bar fines, onto the dirt

roads past seed-scattering elders, past Thai men with broken chests sitting under ill lit tents gambling with their mother's money, off to a place where this beautiful bar girl will lay me down and make me almost forget the only woman I'll ever love. How is it possible to describe that perfect moment to a perfect stranger without sobbing uncontrollably because I know that it will never, ever happen again?

## VITA

Brock Y. Hamlin was born on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1970 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, a small steel town in western Pennsylvania. His family moved to Pittsburgh where the author grew up and completed high school. After graduating from high school, the author joined the navy. After four years, he returned home to attend Carnegie Mellon University where he received a Bachelor of Science degree. He received a commission in the U.S. Navy and served aboard the USS John C. Stennis as the electrical division officer, then aboard the USS Oldendorf as the fire control officer. He has a nineteen-month-old daughter, Gabrielle.